

FEMINISMS



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OUR BODIES ARE NOT JUST BATTLEGROUND: THEY ARE WEAPONS, TOO

Ren Aldridge and Janey Starling

Bodily autonomy is not an abstract political idea: it is something that we feel the presence, or absence, of deeply. We feel it in our bodies, in our thumping hearts, our raw throats, the pits of our stomachs and our intuitive guts. As feminist musicians and activists, our politics are something we live, using our bodies, including the power of our voices and the physical spaces we exist in. Our understanding of bodily autonomy has evolved through praxis – through gigs, lyrics, sexual assaults, fights, abortions, demos and direct actions. This is a collage of reflections on those experiences. It starts at a punk show...

Girls to the front! Women to the front! Trans, non-binary gender non-conforming people to the front! Cis men to the back and the sides – tonight is not all about you!

When we have the stage, we hold the space at the front for women and marginalised genders. It can be a tough commitment to hold this space – sometimes men get aggressive, sometimes we have a stand-off with the crowd and lose set time until they accept these terms – but it is

worth it. The reactions from crowds, and the conversations we've had with people confirms this: so many people have told us it's been the first time they've felt able to dance freely and actually enjoy a punk show. And that, to us, is political praxis.

Ren: *I feel like I have to hold this space when I'm shouting lyrics about issues that overwhelmingly affect women, nonbinary and trans people – sexual assault, abortion, gender based violence, femicide... Our music is heavy, and if I don't say something, men automatically assume the space at the front is theirs, and mosh aggressively with no consideration for anyone around them. It can end up feeling like the kind of patriarchal violence I'm singing against is being in some way reproduced right before my eyes (and sexual assault is not unusual at gigs), so that's why I try to hold a space where we can party, dance, mosh, scream and rage, without ducking punches, being groped or getting pushed to the edges. Here the margins get to be front and centre.*

Janey: *For the best part of ten years, I have sung and danced on stage, in front of women and nonbinary-only mosh pits (sometimes jumping into them), and the joy of it never gets old. The act of performing and co-creating a safe, joyful gig space where women can dance without bumping into or being blocked by men was always far more revolutionary to me than the feminist lyrics I was singing. To me, calling all of the women and non-binary people to the front and centre wasn't so much about safety (as was the original "girls to the front" movement in the 90s hardcore scene) as saying "you belong here – with all your rage and joy – and this is for you."*

Kathleen Hanna put it so simply in the sex-positive Bikini Kill song 'I Like Fucking': "Just 'cause my world, sweet

sister / Is so fucking goddamn full of rape / Does that mean my body must always be a source of pain? Oh, no, no, no, no, no no no." And it's this flipside of feminism we often forget about: the experience of our bodies as places of joy, pleasure and resistance. Physical, collective movement is a well-recognised part of feminist resistance. Barbara Ehrenreich, who has documented the history of collective joy in her book *Dancing In The Streets*, argues that collective and ecstatic dancing is a nearly universal "biotechnology" for binding groups together. Physical movement not only releases emotion, it also creates bonding, trust and equality, dissolving hierarchy and increasing a sense of community. And it is fun, which is healing! In her groundbreaking book on survival from sexual violence, *Trauma and Recovery*, Judith Herman wrote that healing happens in groups. Herman says, "trauma isolates; the group re-creates a sense of belonging." We hold the space to dance and heal together as the baseline (or bass line?!!) for everything else.

FROM OUR BODIES TO YOURS

What feminist punk band doesn't have at least one song about bodily autonomy? We've both covered it pretty extensively in our lyrics. Before we dive into some of them here, in their written form, it's worth saying that lyrics are rarely words on a page: they are sung and screamed and heard! Even the phrase 'writing lyrics' is misleading, because in our experience they're just as likely to be vocalised into existence, emerging from a

rhythm or riff, as they are to be written down. Vocalising words flavours them with emotion, tone and intent. Not all our vocalisations are words and they don't need to be to hold meaning. Arrrrgghhh!! Shhhhh. Pffffftt. Eurrgh. Voice is a bodily communication, generated in vibrating vocal cords and powered by the breath. Extreme vocals are powered by the entire body – squatting into the scream, from the thighs and the stomach. When we address issues relating to bodily autonomy in our lyrics we are addressing them with the very bodies that are threatened by those topics.

Janey: *“Your body is not your own / you have no autonomy / your body is not your own / you are public property” were the first lyrics I ever wrote, back in 2014. The song was called Vagina Police, and it led to the formation of my first band, Dream Nails, because I wanted to find a guitarist who could help me bring the lyrics to life. Those lyrics originated in my body, were sang through my body and found belonging in the bodies of audiences across my six years of performing, recording and touring with that band.*

Vagina Police was an angry polemic about all the ways in which women and marginalised people's bodies are policed (by the state, by the political right and by the transphobic lobby). When it was released in 2017, we used the track, and an accompanying zine on reproductive justice called Your Body Is Not Your Own, to raise money for Abortion Support Network. I've since left that band and my politics have evolved considerably – but bodily autonomy remains my feminist lodestar. From abortion to transition, to prisons and disability justice, our bodies will always be the battlegrounds of our liberation – and that's why fascists want to attack them.

Ren: *A lot has changed since Petrol Girls wrote our most well-known song, Touch Me Again. This track uses the slogan 'My Body, My Choice' as the chorus lyric, and was born directly from my rage at every unwanted hand that ever touched me – every dickhead that felt entitled to my body. It was a hugely empowering experience for me to start shouting those lyrics down the mic at shows, often in spaces where men who had assaulted me or my friends were present, asserting repeatedly: It's MY body. I started speaking about consent on stage before we played it and over the years what I say has developed a fair bit. Trans friends sent me a video of the song being played outside the headquarters of a newspaper that was reporting transphobic bullshit around the time of the Gender Recognition Act consultation in 2018. It struck me then how “My Body, My Choice” also applies to the right to choose how we name our bodies, how we change our bodies, whatever pronouns we want to use – it is about trans rights! And then I got pregnant and the origins of that slogan in the pro-abortion movement hit home extremely viscerally. I love this slogan for the way it holds so many of our different and intersecting struggles, but it was reading Lola Olufemi's incredible book, Feminism Interrupted, that led me to think beyond individual choice and rights, and towards justice.*

MOVING TOWARDS JUSTICE

Choice, as Olufemi so incisively points out, is also something women are blamed for: bad ‘choices’; single mothers with multiple children become the target for policy makers who view them as a scourge on society. Through her work, Janey

has seen how too many single mothers are imprisoned for shoplifting food to feed their children in the absence of proper child benefit support. Sexist logics are reaffirmed with children being the mother's responsibility and not society's. Choice, Olufemi also reminds us, does not exist 'in a vacuum' and part of the evolution of our own politics, has been to recognise both the structural impacts on our own choices, as well as the experiences of those who are not white cisgender women like us – an ongoing learning curve.

A choice and rights-based approach alone does not take into account how race, poverty and class impact different people's ability to act on their decisions, no matter what's on the law books. For instance, if you are wealthy and you live somewhere where abortion is restricted, you likely have the means to travel to access it elsewhere. Equally, here in the UK, if you are a same sex couple you have the same legal right as anyone else to choose to have kids, but are massively disadvantaged in terms of the resources to do so. Whilst heterosexual couples are entitled to three free IVF attempts on the NHS, same sex couples are expected to pay privately, and the costs are astronomical! This huge reproductive injustice was brought to our attention through the experiences of our shared bandmate, Yakkie guitarist and Petrol Girls bassist, Robin. Our feminist punk community was able to help fundraise some of the costs for Robin's IVF, but Robin should have been given the same treatment as a cis het woman! Reproductive justice is often discussed in terms of abortion, but it is just as much about having the resources to become pregnant if you want to be as having

an abortion if you don't.

COUNTERING CULTURE

Fundraising is one way we can support individuals and organisations fighting for reproductive justice, but this needs to be part of a wider strategy pushing for structural change. Shifting cultural attitudes and mindsets towards abortion and other reproductive justice issues is a key part of this, and something that we both try to do through our music and activism.

Ren: *Once I realised the ways that culture reproduces (shit) ideas like the nation state and the gender binary, I began to see it as a battleground, and this has informed how I think about making art and music ever since. This approach is pretty clear with our more recent single, Baby, I Had An Abortion – a celebration of my own abortion and an attack on the shame, stigma and silencing surrounding the topic. It is intentionally joyful and irreverent, because being able to make that decision and rid myself of a foetus that I did not want to carry, was for me, something to celebrate.*

Baby, I had an abortion, and I'm not sorry!

The song is also another example of a bodily experience supporting my politics. When I became pregnant, my pro-abortion politics shifted from an abstract principle to a physical need to remove the foetus from my body. I knew I was pregnant before I did the test. It was a deep and intimate knowledge, accompanied by a rising nausea. I did the pregnancy test the morning after the Eighth Amendment was repealed

in Ireland, before a particularly well-timed job cleaning up the bin area of student halls, and as each rancid smell turned my stomach, thanked the almighty of fucks that I could have an abortion with comparative ease. During that time, I also attended a 'Now For Northern Ireland' pro-abortion demo, and almost fainted from the morning sickness. I vividly remember that being where my conviction to contribute to pro-abortion movements cemented – my nausea laced with boiling horror at the thought that, for so many others in my position, there wasn't a way out. For them, the way out was blocked by the state, or lack of services, or social pressure, or abuse, or any number of reasons. This is why we will always use the song Baby, I Had An Abortion, to fundraise for organisations like Abortion Without Borders!

The abortion itself – done with pills under nurse supervision in hospital because of an apparently useless copper coil still floating around inside me – was fine. A bit grim... but fine. And when I left the hospital eight hours later, I already felt better than I had in weeks. The nausea was gone! I had my life back! I knew I wanted to write a song about it, but the idea really solidified after encounters that I had with anti-abortion activists in Graz, Austria, where I now live. The first time I encountered them, I saw red and ended up following them down the main street screaming 'I HAD AN ABORTION AND I'M NOT SORRY' at them, and continued to do so at a number of counter demos. But in the end, these encounters frustrated me: I felt like my anger was legitimising them in some way by taking them seriously. I wanted to undermine them. I wanted to express more pride and defiance, to say, look, in spite of people like you, I did it anyway and I'm not sorry! This experience is what grew into Baby, I Had An Abortion. It has been an absolute joy to protest attacks on our bodily autonomy with my own voice and body. Leaping around stage and into

the crowd yelling these lyrics with people singing along is so empowering, as was seeing the song performed in a theatre production: Voll Lieb (AT) by Anja M. Wohlfahrt und Sophia Barthelmes. I hope the song can continue to serve the movement for reproductive justice and contribute to eroding the shame and stigma around abortion.

SHAME! SHAME! SHAME! Point your finger and cry SHAME! SHAME! SHAME! Oh, I feel it deep inside!

Janey: *A key strategy of Level Up, the feminist organisation that I co-direct, is to identify and interrupt cultural moments to challenge the way our bodily autonomy is restricted by the state. Our Abortion Is Healthcare campaign aims to shift cultural attitudes toward abortion in the UK, to change it from a moral debate to a public health issue. This cultural shift is critical if we are to succeed in decriminalising abortion. Many people (Ren at the time of her abortion included!) are unaware that abortion is illegal in the UK without the permission of two doctors, and that there are women in prison here in the UK for managing their own abortions outside of that framework. This is why we produced a media guideline on how journalists should report on abortion, and why they need to stop quoting anti-abortion lobby groups – because this would never happen for any other public health issue!*

OUR BODIES ARE WEAPONS

We fight for a world in which everyone's bodies are their own: at a minimum this means a world without rape and abuse, access to abortion and transition healthcare, and the abolition of prisons. The most basic foundational principle

for a liveable, liberated life is that your body is your own and you get to decide what happens to it. Bodily autonomy means that you have the right to make decisions about your body and life without intrusion from the state, without violation from any individual, and that you have access to the means and resources to carry out those decisions.

Whilst attacks on bodily autonomy escalate, we need to remember that our bodies are not just battlegrounds – they are weapons in their own right! We use our bodies to take direct action, to stop fascists from marching, to de-arrest people, to block the police, to carry giant shopping bags full of banners, to care for each other, to fill the streets. But like a muscle, it needs to be built, with practice.

Ren: *One of the times I've felt most powerful in my body at a demonstration was when performing Las Tesis' viral protest choreography Un Violador en tu Camino. I felt connected to the group I was part of, and to a whole global movement, repeating those words and movements that I'd seen performed all over the world in videos online. The act of pointing in unison at the police, various State buildings and directly at the public whilst chanting 'the rapist is you' underlines the structural nature of this violence in a direct, visceral, embodied way. It felt like taking the violence done to my body by those structures and throwing it right back at them.*

Janey: *My first taste of collective embodied power was in 2015, where alongside 13 fellow activists from Sisters Uncut, I jumped onto the red carpet at the premiere of the film 'Suffragette' to protest government cuts to domestic abuse services. We chose the film premiere because the media narrative around it positioned feminist struggle as a historical*

event, when every week in the UK two women are murdered by a partner or ex-partner and the Conservative government were closing off escape routes for women at risk of death.

We vaulted over the crowd barriers, threw ourselves down on the carpet, linked arms, closed our eyes at the flashing lights of the world's media and chanted "dead women can't vote!" I remember shaking with adrenaline. Security got rough and tried to drag some of us away (before realising how bad those optics were) but we held onto one other. Ten minutes later, confident we'd made our point, we ran off laughing into the night.

Feminism is a collective, political muscle-building through which we unlearn and relearn new ways of living and relating together. It is not about 'empowering' personal choices, which focus on elevating internal feelings, as opposed to rebalancing external power relations, but physically and metaphorically jumping on the mic, shouting at men to stand back, and getting in the pit. Whether making healthcare choices, taking direct action or performing onstage, exercising agency over your body when it has been a site of violation is personally and politically transformative.

Smell the fresh sweat from the slippery bodies packed next to yours. Feel the drums and your heart and their hearts thumping. Let the music move you. Move your body. Be moved by theirs. Dance to the rhythm of everyone around you. Feel their joy, rage, energy, power. Your power. Our power.

Ren Aldridge is an artist, researcher and writer currently based in Graz, Austria. She founded The Resistance Quilt Project – an ongoing community art project about resistance to fem(in)icide – and fronts feminist punk band Petrol Girls.

Janey Starling is a writer, musician and co-director of campaign organisation Level Up. Based in London, she spearheads the national campaign to end the imprisonment of pregnant women and fronts a punk band called Yakkie.



AND THE ACADEMY AWARD GOES TO...

Stacey Clare

On 2nd March 2025, Mikey Madison won her first Oscar for Best Actress, playing the lead role in *Anora*, a film that garnered immediate success and fascination worldwide. Her performance as a sex worker caught up in a rags-to-riches scenario that touches on every imaginable stereotype about a young impressionable nobody working in the sex industry was received with critical acclaim, and lauded as “Pretty Woman for the 21st Century.” Not only did the film hit a home run, but notably Madison’s acceptance speech hit the headlines for unprecedented reasons. As she took to the stage at the prestigious ceremony to thank the usual roll call of family members, colleagues and director, Sean Baker, she also stated:

“I also just want to recognize and honour the sex worker community. I will continue to support and be an ally; all of the incredible people, the women I’ve had the privilege of meeting from that community has been one of the highlights of this entire incredible experience.”

Madison had also previously name-checked sex workers during her acceptance speech for Best Actress at the 2025

BAFTAs by saying:

"I do want to just take a moment to recognise the sex worker community. I just want to say that I see you. You deserve respect and human decency. I will always be a friend and ally, and I implore others to do the same."

Madison is not the only celebrity to reach out a branch of solidarity to sex workers during this year's award season. On 1st March, pop-star Chappell Roan announced in her acceptance speech for Best International Artist at the BRIT Awards:

"I dedicate this to trans artists, to drag queens, to fashion students, sex workers, and Sinéad O'Connor. Because of all those people – they have laid the groundwork for me to be here today. I did not give up because of them, and I will continue going because of them."

With sex workers enjoying this level of public acceptance, shouldn't my community be celebrating such a huge step towards de-stigmatisation? In reality, there have been very few reasons to celebrate. Allow me to explain.

As a sex worker myself, I've become used to the feeling of discomfort I experience whenever I see paid actors applauded for their performance of a role that I've been playing myself for over 18 years. There is a saying among sex workers, when we gather at peer-to-peer meets (or as I like to call them covens) to process, decompress and cackle about the everyday stresses of our jobs; whenever one of us describes a particularly challenging client, for whom we've needed to draw most deeply from our well of emotional, psychological and physical resources to perform successfully

enough, we say: "I should have got an Oscar for that." What I have learned from 18 years of sex work couldn't be taught at RADA. Yet, no matter how many awards, nominations and accolades given to actors pretending to be us, sex workers continue to live with social stigma, criminalisation, police brutality, misinformed governmental policy and systemic violence.

Mikey Madison's acknowledgment of sex workers as the real-life humans behind the fictional representation is a step in the right direction. Her words serve as an important reminder that our work, lives, relationships and existence continue well after the credits have rolled – especially after more than a century of cinema reproducing sex working characters and earning professional actors high praise without ever publicly celebrating, acknowledging or giving thanks to the people they pretend to be.

Given the media parade that followed from Madison's largesse, claiming it to be a celebration and moment of joy for sex workers everywhere, I had high expectations of *Anora* – which, sadly, were never met. It wasn't just the storyline: working class stripper, Annie, lives in a poor neighbourhood, descended from immigrants, speaks just enough Russian to impress the son of a billionaire oligarch with whom she has a lavish whirlwind romance and Vegas wedding. Upon hearing of the marriage, oligarch parents send henchmen to break up the couple and have the marriage annulled. The storyline is in fact the opposite of *Pretty Woman*: the final outcome of the adventure with

her “saviour” Prince Charming is entirely traumatic and demoralising for Annie. *Anora* simply reiterates the age-old Hollywood tropes of sex workers as tragic, fallen women, whose work is dangerous and whose lives are worthless; it says nothing new, nor does it deviate in the slightest from the most widely held assumptions and core beliefs about sex workers, further entrenching social stigma to the detriment of the people that the film represents.

There was a scene in *Anora* that triggered me seriously enough to pause the film so I didn’t get horribly overwhelmed. When the henchmen with thick Eastern European accents turn up to assert dominance over the young lovers, Annie’s new husband flees, leaving her alone with them. The scene is reminiscent of Guy Ritchie’s penchant for bumbling gangsters, idiots whose mission to “take care” of things becomes a comedy of errors. In this scene Annie fights back whilst being restrained, managing to land a kick to the face, breaking one of their noses, before ultimately being overpowered. I knew, rationally, how this moment was intended to be read by audiences: go off, girl! Yay, Annie, the fierce, feisty, independent woman! But my central nervous system, as a sex worker myself, understood only the danger she was in. Alone and defenceless in a room with 3 men, wearing only a hoodie and a thong, I saw a woman who could be raped, murdered and disposed of without question. I saw the power imbalance of her low social status versus the billionaire patriarch’s minions. Every TV show, film, book, or storyline that has ever been fed into our collective psyche about sex workers ending up

dead, assaulted or worse, came flooding into my awareness; so, while the three men don’t do any of those things to Annie, the implicit threat of violence was practically the same as watching it happen. I hated this scene so much, almost more so for the fact of its attempt at a Vinnie Jones-style gangland parody.

The final straw for me was realising the title, *Anora*, is the name assigned to Annie at birth, which she no longer wishes to go by. Once the henchmen have her ID in their possession, they call her Anora, the name on her legal documents. Each time they do she repeatedly tries to correct them, asking them to call her Annie, which they ignore. The very title of the film, her dead name, is an act of obfuscation, deriding the wishes of her character to be seen, heard and acknowledged by the identity she has chosen, erasing her autonomy altogether. The film, by my estimation, is a train-wreck of confused metaphors, clumsy inferences, and devastating stereotypes. Sean Baker, known also for making another film about sex work, *Tangerine*, whose protagonist, a trans sex worker in LA who runs riot after discovering her boyfriend and pimp has cheated on her, appears to hit upon the full trifecta of sex work stereotypes: survival, violence and cultural aesthetics.

Baker appears to be the living embodiment of everything Laura Mulvey spoke of in her 1975 essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” where she argues that mainstream film is structured around the “male gaze,” positioning women as passive objects of visual pleasure for a presumed heterosexual male viewer. The unbroken chain from male

director to viewer via the camera lens is, in the case of *Anora*, very obvious. Watching it as a sex worker myself, there was nothing transformative or empowering about the film, only sad, old tropes about victimhood.

I wonder how films like this even continue to get made... but then, I only need to take a quick look at Hollywood for my answer. Its glamour and darkness continue to dominate popular culture as much as ever. We still can't get enough salacious scandals, weird social hierarchies, and impossible beauty standards, no matter how much we learn of the psychological damage some of the most famous people on earth go through.

The #metoo movement changed the face of TV and film forever; yet no one campaigned to abolish the film and TV industry, despite the tsunami of testimonies from victims. Prosecuting individuals like Harvey Weinstein was a win for feminism, but tackling the power dynamics that still exploit young, impressionable and vulnerable performers in just about every area of entertainment seems to be on the back burner. If the P. Diddy trial is anything to go by, it has barely even begun.

When it came to campaigns calling to end demand for paid sexual labour and shut down the sex industry entirely, some members of the Hollywood elite famously made it their "cause célèbre." After Amnesty International publicly announced their new policy in support of full decriminalisation of sex work, many big-name actors added their names to a Change.org petition demanding the NGO

withdraw it on grounds that decriminalisation would create the perfect conditions for sexual exploitation and violence to thrive (despite the obvious logic that criminalised marketplaces are run by criminals, therefore criminalisation creates the conditions for violent, coercive and criminal enterprise). Without listening to any of the demands made by global sex worker-led organisations, or taking onboard the important research data on harm-reduction that formed the basis of Amnesty International's policy proposal, celebrities wading in to platform an ill-informed argument did not help sex workers. Plenty of celebrities had also famously played roles lifted and developed directly from the sex industry, including Anne Hathaway, who won an Oscar for playing survival sex worker Fantine in *Les Misérables* (2012), and Emma Thompson, who went on to the role of Nancy Stokes, a retired schoolteacher who hires a sex worker in *Good Luck To You, Leo Grande* (2022) – an irony that seems almost fictional.

It's fair to say that sex workers have been part of cinema history right from the beginning. Actors have been winning Oscars for playing sex workers for nearly a century: Elizabeth Taylor in *Butterfield 8* (1960), Jane Fonda in *Klute* (1971), Mira Sorvino in *Mighty Aphrodite* (1995). Sex workers' stories are intertwined with the silver screen as far back as the earliest moving pictures: for example, *Camille*, a silent movie so popular it was made 3 times, in 1915, 1921 and 1926 (and once more again in 1936, the era of sound), and was considered a block-buster of its time, earning Greta Garbo an Oscar nomination for her iconic performance

of a Parisian courtesan, Marguerite; or *Diary Of A Lost Girl* (1929) which was so provocative it was banned until later finding critical acclaim, and now considered a Weimar masterpiece.

Themes of “white slavery” used as narratives to portray brothel workers have dominated mainstream understanding of sex work so successfully that the effects are still being felt today. Two such movies made in 1913 had a seismic impact on public opinion: *Traffic In Souls*, directed by George Loane Tucker, about two Swedish sisters alone in New York targeted and exploited by human traffickers, was considered to be the first American feature-length film ever made (running over an hour) and was hugely popular; the infamous “docudrama” *The Inside Of The White Slave Traffic*, which was produced by the U.S. Moral Efficiency League, claimed to be a public education film revealing the techniques used to recruit girls into prostitution, yet contained gratuitously voyeuristic and sensationalised elements, earning it widespread viewership. Both of these films were produced soon after a new U.S. federal law, the Mann Act 1910, made it a crime to transport people across state lines for ‘immoral’ purposes, including prostitution. (Incidentally, the Mann Act was enacted 115 years later to prosecute Sean ‘P. Diddy’ Combs for alleged trafficking offences).

It can’t be under-estimated how influential films have been in shaping public debates on sex work and moral hygiene, fuelling public fears and building support for laws that have disproportionately impacted marginalised communities,

women in poverty and people of colour.

Some of the most well-known and highly-regarded performances of all time have been sex working characters: think of Jodie Foster in *Taxi Driver* (1976), Charlize Theron for her Oscar winning performance as Aileen Wuornos in *Monster* (2003), or J-Lo, extolled for cos-playing a stripper in *Hustlers* (2019). All of these, and more, are performances that ignited public discourse on sex work, decency and moral outrage – but the question remains: can any benefit be felt directly by sex workers from watching ourselves represented on the big screen for over a hundred years?

The answer, if you ask me and my cohort of whoring friends, is essentially: no. Our work is criminalised and our lives and livelihoods are threatened with violence, stigma, and now in the UK a new wave of legislation that seeks to censor our very existence online. The Online Safety Act 2023 has brought a landslide of mass deletion of sex workers’ social media accounts, pushing us back into obscurity. Dr Carolina Are PhD is an academic at Northumbria University’s Centre for Digital Citizens, whose research focuses on social media and the impact of online censorship on marginalised communities. According to Are:

“Sex workers have always been the primary targets of online ‘safety’ legislation. And while safety must absolutely be improved in digital spaces, it tends to be an excuse for platforms to implement stringent content moderation in order to cull content their advertisers may dislike, or that may affect their image... Something I always ask in my research is: safety for whom? Is it really safety if it comes at

the expense of an extremely marginalised demographic being pushed further underground, losing access to networking spaces and work opportunities? In my work, I've found this has devastating financial and emotional consequences."

So, what can be concluded from all this? At a point in time that sex workers are enjoying levels of public acceptance in the highest echelons of society – when we get a shout-out at the Oscars even – we are routinely being culled en masse from the public spaces of the internet. With an irony so poetic it could come straight out of a Hollywood blockbuster, sex worker representation in popular culture has exploded at the exact same time as we are experiencing expanding systemic violence. We can take nothing for granted.

"It's one thing to exist in art as a sex worker, (but) as long as somebody else is depicting you, you can't be in control of your own image."

– Camille Melissa Waring

Stacey Clare is a sex worker, published author of *The Ethical Stripper* (2022, Unbound), producer and performer of the hit show *Ask a Stripper* at Edinburgh Fringe, and co-founding member of the East London Strippers Collective.

She is still hanging on in there on Instagram @ethicalstripper.



KEEPING THE HOUSE, BUILDING THE MOVEMENT: THE HOUSING STRUGGLE AND FEMINISM

Abu Leila

In a meeting in Serbia about setting up a Belgrade tenants union, in 2022, I had an argument with Polish comrades about the purpose of housing organising. They stated that their union was full of racist and misogynistic renters, but that they did not prioritise challenging them, because the purpose of the union was to win social housing, not to argue with people about things like racism and feminism. I disagreed.

Through my five years of organising with the London Renters Union (LRU), I have learned that ideas that might seem fuzzy or abstract ('racism', 'sexism', 'queerphobia', 'ableism') manifest in very material ways in the world: in homelessness and ceilings that fall on your head. And while, of course, I want us to have safe and stable homes, I also believe that coming together around something as fundamental and material as housing can help us tackle the systems that put us in these situations in the first place: racial capitalism, with all its attached forms of oppression.

I didn't get into housing organising because I want a house (though I do want a house), but because I want liberation for all of us, and I believe liberation has to be fought on the material, concrete grounds that shape our lives.

I want to start this essay with a very concrete story. L is a member of the London Renters Union, a brilliant organiser, an incredible translator, a single mother, a migrant, and a survivor of domestic violence. She came to the UK to marry her husband, who was horrifically abusive. After enduring the abuse for years, years in which she was not allowed to work or study, she took her young son and left. She went to the council and asked for help, and they offered her a place in Essex, far away from anyone she knew, from her son's school, from any sense of community. There, she experienced repeated racist abuse from her neighbours, which drove her to return to the council asking to be moved. They said that by leaving the house where she was being racially abused, she had made herself intentionally homeless. L and her son, now four-years-old, lived in a mosque, with nowhere else to go. A man came forward to help: a big landlord, who owns tens of houses and businesses across London, and is well-connected to many councillors. He promised he'd speak to the council for her and offered to rent her one of his houses. L had no other options, so she accepted. Only a few months later, the landlord began making more and more demands of her, eventually attempting to rape her in front of her son. She escaped, and found herself homeless again. She reported this to a councillor she was in touch with, who ignored her.

She made yet another homelessness application, and was offered temporary accommodation in a block so ill-kept it caught fire. She was moved again, this time to temporary accommodation in an area she had friends and community in. Her son, now starting primary school, finally began to settle in a supportive school environment. But the landlord decided to put up the rent, so she received a Section-21, no fault-eviction. Yet again, she approached the council for help. Despite the fact that she had moved four times in two years, and experienced street homelessness with her son in this time, the council waited until the bailiffs kicked her out to intervene. She had to go to their door at night, asking for help. Then, they moved her far from her entire support system, away from her community, from her son's school, her job and her studies. She was too exhausted to fight back.

This story, though harrowing, is common. With slight changes to the details, it's a story I hear several times a month in the LRU. It is painfully obvious that L's struggle for housing justice is a feminist struggle: she was fighting for the freedom to leave an abusive marriage, for the ability to work and study as a woman (which is tied to having a place to live), for childcare and education (which is tied to having a stable community), for safety from violence in and outside the home. This type of feminism is deeply material. It's focused on changing the relationships of power in our society in order to materially improve our lives.

The narrative promoted by transphobes and racists everywhere is that violence against women is something that

comes from outside, from people on the edges of society that should be kept out, like migrant men or trans women. We saw this with leading transphobes in the UK who, having won the Supreme Court judgement on what defines a woman, quickly moved on to start the Women's Safety Initiative, aiming to target the next great threat to women: migrant men. L's story, however, shows that violence against women comes from inside a normal society: it's violence at home, at the hands of husbands and fathers, and violence in the normal structures of our society, like councils and landlords. There is no liberation for women from keeping someone out, the only route is to transform the system entirely. Transform the houses we live in, and the system that controls them.

L's story is a story of injustice, but she received more support than someone in the same situation who the system doesn't class as vulnerable and deserving. A migrant domestic violence survivor with no recourse to public funds would never have qualified for any help. An adult, single, able man who has been put on a zero-hour contract that doesn't pay enough, and can't pay his rent, and goes through a violent eviction at the hands of the police, will never be considered vulnerable enough to deserve housing help. His trauma is simply too common, a part of how the system works. As feminists, we challenge gendered and racialised ideas of vulnerability. As housing organisers, we challenge the idea of there being anybody who is resilient enough to be just fine on the streets. And so, our aim has to be transforming the system.

To achieve that, we need to organise. I have found organising renters an almost impossible acrobatic operation of balancing care and power. We need powerful organisations able to take action often, and win. We also need organisations that are able to care for their people, in a system that is uncaring, often violent and disabling. Housing affects everything. When we go to work, the shape of our home does not leave us. Having a house allows you to be a worker; needing a house *forces* you to be a worker. It makes you more willing to accept any job, for any pay (as long as you can work enough hours!) because without it you'll find yourself homeless – especially as the benefit system becomes more inaccessible and punitive every year.

Renters join organisations tired, overworked, sick, on the edge of homelessness. L stopped organising after her last experience of eviction and displacement: she no longer had the emotional energy to engage with the idea of housing, she no longer believed it was possible to win. This was in part our fault: we were not strong enough as a movement to force her council to change the way they dealt with homelessness. In other cases, where we did stop evictions, get repairs done, win rehousing, I saw the opposite thing happen: faith and energy regained and new working class leaders taking power. Building power is in itself a form of care. Even so, I see again and again the brilliant leaders of our movement get sick, mentally and physically, due to their housing situations and the difficulties of being poor in London.

As organisers, we cannot change the violence of capitalism from one day to the other, but we can ensure that our organising spaces are nourishing, caring, and militant. In LRU, we build a fighting organisation with hot meals cooking and children running around. The times when I've felt most engaged with plotting how to confront the state, landlords, and the very idea of owning land and profiting from it have often been in a comrade's living room, eating the sweetest kheer. These two things depend on each other: if we didn't have the childcare, the food, the vibes, the hungry revolutionaries with three kids in their care would never be able to come out of their homes and organise. This pays off. I think of my comrade K, who also became homeless after she left her abusive husband. She started reaching out to other parents in her situation and bringing them into the union. She organised workshops in her school – a school which had a living room in it, because so many of the parents live in temporary accommodation homes with no living room of their own. She made sure everything she organised was something that people with kids could attend: something in school hours, or with facepainting and fun for the children.

It is clear from all this that the aims and the tactics of the housing movement must be feminist. I want to go a step further to say: the type of feminism I find in the housing struggle is specifically an anti-racist, revolutionary trans-feminism. The two boroughs in London with the highest rate of working-class people stuck in the hell of the private rented sector are Newham and Brent. Newham – where I organise

– also has the highest rate of temporary accommodation in the whole country. These are the two most migrant and working-class branches of LRU, both very active branches that go from win to win. These two boroughs are also the two places with the highest number of trans people in the UK according to the 2021 UK Census. A quarter of trans people have been homeless at some point in their lives: a statistic much higher than that of the general population. This is an issue that is being tackled by trans community organising groups such as Trans Action for Housing Justice (TAHJ). The united front for gender liberation for both cis women and trans people is clear in the housing struggle. In my time organising in the LRU, I've observed this front being formed in real time. I remember my comrade V, a black migrant woman who got involved in the union when she was forced to accept a house with a violent landlord who evicted her after months of harassment – with the help of scornful policemen – because no 'legit' agency would rent to someone on a carer's salary. She quickly took leadership in the organisation, turning up to every single eviction resistance at the crack of dawn, before heading off for a long day of work. She negotiated with politicians, screamed at protests and cooked for everybody. She was also very active in her church, getting a priest to preach about the London Renters Union and recruiting church members into the organisation. V is a very devout catholic and was initially ambivalent about LGBT rights. When she met trans comrades in the union, she asked to speak to me. "I need you to explain the pronouns to me. How do you use

they/them?” she asked me, “I don’t want to get it wrong. I love everyone in the union.”

This work we do, working across differences, building communities of struggle, is not easy. A given meeting will normally have several languages, people of all ages, of different religions and backgrounds, of different genders and sexualities. I am not here to say that simply coming together in the same space and fighting for the same thing is enough to overcome the divisions in our community. But it is a powerful starting point, from which we can build a united front of struggle that sees clearly what we have to gain from each other, and the joint enemies we have to fight. While capitalist and state violence breaks communities apart, forcing people to move from place to place, unable to build networks of support, our struggle builds communities able to fight it all despite this. Starting from our fundamental need for homes, we are building a political home for the racially diverse working class of this city, a feminist movement ready to take on the state and the ruling class.

Abu Leila organises with the London Renters Union. They’re a queer Arab author, winner of the Bridport Prize, the London Writers Awards, the Ghassan Kanafani Resistance Arts Prize, and shortlisted for the Wasafiri Queen Mary New Writing Prize. They want to see capitalism and imperialism burn.



THE BANK & THE MAYOR'S OFFICE WON'T GIVE US OUR FREEDOM

Lola Olufemi

ONE

In June 2020, Deniz Jaffer and Jamie Lewis take photographs of the dead bodies of Nicole Smallman and Biba Henry; Lewis superimposes his face onto one of the women and shares the image in a WhatsApp group. In May 2021, Sarah Everard is murdered by serving police officer Wayne Couzens. In the same month, the government introduces the Police Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill, which extends police power to detain, arrest, surveil, and control protest. The Bill increases conditions related to the 'disruption to the life of the community' via protest, enabling police more power to control the size, movement and noise of protests, whether static or moving, involving one person or multiple people. The introduction of Serious Violence Reduction Orders (orders modelled on the Prevent Duty) and Serious Violence Duty removes the need for reasonable grounds for police stop and searches for specific individuals, forces hospitals and local authorities to hand over information

about patients to police and enables punitive measures to be imposed on those who “ought to have known” that another person carrying a weapon would commit an offence.

TWO

She could be anyone. Various named Zarah, Sarah or Jane in Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) sector reports, she makes up the one in six women in the United Kingdom who have experienced financial coercion or abuse in a current or former relationship. This looks like credit cards being created in her name, being forced to take on debt, the threat or actual withdrawal of food or other necessities. An allowance to spend on certain items controlled by a partner. Sometimes it's not enough to feed herself and the baby and so on many nights she goes hungry. She cannot leave. She has nowhere to go.

Feminism is a political methodology that can help us name the structural, interpersonal and otherwise murky forces that make up a social landscape. It does so by enabling an examination and analysis of the material conditions that underpin social organisation; it helps us understand the ways that capitalism's operation is specifically gendered and racialised in its arrangement of labour, social relationships and the economy, as well as prisons and the

police. In trying to define their method, the way they would go about arriving at their political conclusions, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels wrote,

“The premises from which we begin are not arbitrary ones, not dogmas, but real premises... They are real individuals, their activity and the material conditions under which they live, both those which they find already existing and those produced by their activity.”

Our material conditions consist of the means and resources we use to produce our subsistence and the power structures, relationships between people, norms and behaviours that determine that production. For example, how is our food, clothing, buildings made and what are the relationships between people that enable this making? To say that feminism should enable an examination of material conditions simply means that feminism should help us think about the processes, means, activities that go into creating people and daily life in any given society. Jennifer Wicke notes that a materialist feminist approach:

“argues that material conditions of all sorts play a vital role in the social production of gender and assays the different ways in which women collaborate and participate in these productions.”

How are material conditions crucial in the production of gender? How does the way we live, all the resources that we do or do not have access to, produce our understanding of ourselves, others and, perhaps most importantly, the violence

we experience? These questions are crucial for abolitionists, because they often make direct links between the quality of one's material conditions and the criminalisation of certain activities. They attempt to uncover why it is that certain activities related to subsistence are often criminalised, and how, as Ruth Wilson Gilmore argues, prisons became the answer to social problems. If you are a mother whose state benefits have been cut, and you cannot afford to feed your child so you steal baby formula from Tesco, you do so because a basic need (the need to eat) is not being met by your material conditions. We know, for example, that a majority of women in prison have experienced domestic or sexual violence, and one study of men imprisoned in HM Prison Parc found that 84% of male prisoners reported being exposed to childhood 'adversity' or abuse. In these instances, it is the basic need for nurturing, sustaining and caring relationships that provide comfort, safety and stability at any early age that has not been met. Rather than think of crime as a matter of individual wants, desires and wills, this theoretical framework helps to ground our assessment of violence by asking why certain activities are criminalised, why certain needs are not met; perhaps most crucially, it helps us develop political strategies to meet those needs communally as a means of initiating societal transformation. It externalises violence, exposing how a violent society produces cycles of harm, it points us towards the exploitation and seizure of resource made permissible by capitalism as the ultimate source of emotional, physical and physical harm to human beings.

If we turn to the question of violence against women, feminists that long argued that what traps women into cycles of harm – at the hands of bosses, partners, police officers and strangers – is the way their subjugation – in the family structure, in the workplace, as political subjects in the street, in their interpersonal relationships – is sown into the fabric of their material conditions. A migrant worker with no recourse to public funds cannot demand better working conditions from her boss; a sex worker, whose work is criminalised if she refuses to work alone, cannot protect herself from violent clients; a woman experiencing financial abuse cannot leave if all the domestic violence shelters around her have shut down due to funding cuts. The most vulnerable often do not have access to the resources that would enable them to escape violent situations because resources have been withheld from them through the slow expropriation of wealth from the working class upwards, a process managed by the state. We know that the history of capitalism's formation is plagued by stratifications in society. Lisa Lowe writes that "capitalism exploits through culturally and socially constructed differences such as race, gender, region, and nationality and is lived through those uneven formations" and so, experiences of cycles of harm by women are lived differently, inflected through race and other vectors, leaving racialised women, disabled women, migrants, anyone whose labour powers the dark underbelly of capitalist production, the furthest from the resources they need to survive.

In 2023, Transport for London, in partnership with the Rail Delivery Group, British Transport Police, the Metropolitan Police Service and The City of London Police launched an “anti-harassment” campaign aimed at promoting a culture of active bystanding on public transport. Adverts describe certain behaviours such as catcalling, pressing, flashing and upskirting as forms of sexual harassment, and provide commuters with scripted lines to help them intervene in violent instances. This campaign was no doubt created to soothe the quell of feminist anger in the wake of the violent murder of Sarah Everard and to respond to the demands of the feminist coalition behind the #KILLTHEBILL movement aimed at preventing the passage of the Police, Courts, Crime and Sentencing Bill in 2021. Since then, it has been near impossible to get on a train, tube or bus in the capital city and not see a poster from a bank or the mayor’s office, either providing information on bystander intervention or offering help to vulnerable people to escape financial abuse. These adverts have been lauded as signs of progress, evidence that the safety of women is priority for the government and its institutions. The experience of exposure to these adverts, day after day as I ride the train, is not a coincidence. I turn to feminism is ask, why this, why now, what do I know to be true about material conditions that is being obscured by these campaigns? How can I understand that these adverts are not a sign of the government’s moral stand against violence but a symbolic

mechanism through which it projects the illusion of care whilst the quality of life and standard of living across the country continues to decline?

We can use a materialist feminist method to analyse these campaigns and identify the gap between the state’s promises and priorities and the actual violence in the form of harassment, stalking and abuse experienced disproportionately by women across the United Kingdom. Feminism reminds me that these adverts are not only reflective of the society I live in (one where gendered violence is an ever-present threat) but they are constitutive of it. They are part of the fabric of a social arrangement in which people’s needs are not met and yet they are continually required to invest in the belief that the bank truly cares about them, that the Metropolitan Police want their safety, or that a few feeble tips on bystander intervention are enough to seriously challenge the culture of violence that kills women in their homes, incarcerates them if they defend themselves and enables them to be mocked by police officers in their death. Trying to understand how and why these instances are connected means tracing the decline of material conditions in the United Kingdom. This brings us back to the devastating effects of neoliberalism which, in the last two decades alone, have produced a social landscape in which the welfare benefits once provided by the state – legal aid, social housing, Personal Independence Payment, domestic violence shelters, child tax credits, educational maintenance allowance – have either disappeared or been

reformed to decrease access to them whilst the apparatuses of criminalisation have been fortified, expanded. In their “Plan for Change” the new Labour government under Keir Starmer has promised £2.3 billion towards prison builds over the next two years, with the aim of establishing 14,000 places by 2031.

To understand the anti-harassment campaign as a representative function of the decline in material conditions, we must study the effects of neoliberalism not only on the economy but on people and social relationships. Post-war Britain was partly characterised by reforms related to health and education, the construction of a social welfare system that was powered by the labour from those from the former colonies. Until the mid 1970s, successive Labour Governments pursued economic and social policies favourable to Trade Unions, which translated to a rise in living standards and forms of voluntary wage control. The social effects of such policies produced somewhat meaningful reliance on the state to reach subsistence, the notion that education and health as basic needs should be free and accessible. (These resources were, of course, unevenly distributed: in 1962, the Commonwealth Immigrant Act placed stringent and draconian restrictions on the ability of Commonwealth Citizens to migrate to the United Kingdom.) The breakdown of this socialist contract by the Labour government and the introduction of privatisation and increasing financialisation from 1979 onwards under Margaret Thatcher changed not only the structure the

economy but social relations. In *Feminism Interrupted*, I defined neoliberalism as: the imposition of cultural and economic policies and practices by NGOs and governments in the last three to four decades that have resulted in the extraction and redistribution of public resources from the working class upwards, decimated infrastructures of social care through austerity measures, privatised the welfare state and individualised the ways we relate to one another.

Neoliberalism was and is specifically gendered in its application: austerity measures implemented from 2010 in order to “balance the budget” hit women, who are more likely to be in low wage work and have multiple dependents, the hardest. When feminists argue that gender is produced through the relations that structure material conditions, they are arguing that it is the structure of labour, work and the economy that often determine their fates. A society that is built fundamentally on the exploitation of many for the benefit of those who retain ownership of resource can never and will never end gendered violence, precisely because it depends on that violence to function. It needs gig-economy precarity that women are overwhelmingly concentrated in, poorly paid cleaning and childcare work, for example, in order to survive. The social doctrine of neoliberalism, when first introduced in the late 1970s, argued that rather than rely on state benefits or welfare, one must depend on themselves, their own ingenuity and their work in order to survive. The legacies of this political mandate expressed in austerity cuts slashed through what remained of the welfare

state, plunging thousands into precarity. In 1987, Margaret Thatcher famously declared "...who is society? There is no such thing!" ushering in an anti-communalism that no doubt has shaped approaches to prisons, policing and violence; if there is no communal answer to violence, no such thing as society, then support for expansion of carceral systems as an effective deterrent persists.

When I get on the tube and see HSBC attempting to raise awareness about financial abuse, I think about how degraded, broken our welfare system has become in the last decade and a half that this knowledge has been outsourced to a financial company rather than the pre-existing state structures that could provide a material change in the lives of working class women through resource. I think that the privatisation of our everyday lives is complete. I do not think that HSBC, whose incentive is the accumulation of wealth, cares about the fates of women across the country, but that there is capital to be made, consent to be manufactured through the appearance of this help. As feminist direct action group Sisters Uncut have always maintained, women need safe routes for escaping violent situations. A bank will never give that to them, no matter how much it claims it wants to.

Similarly, the collusion with policing institutions to tackle sexual harassment, as with TFL and the Metropolitan Police, results in increased instances of criminalisation of the poor, which cannot end sexual violence, because we are most likely to experience sexual violence at the hands

of someone we know. Often violence against racialised working class people and those in mental distress on the public transport system is justified and encouraged because they are deemed a "threat" to those around them. The case of Jordan Neely, who was choked to death by Daniel Penny on a New York subway line is one recent example. Whilst bystander intervention, shutting down harm when and where we see it, is important, when these solidaristic actions are advertised by the state, they lose their radical potential because they become attached to the incentive for individuals to "report" instances of harassment to the police, reanimating cycles of criminalisation. What good is reporting violence to an institution that enables it? The Metropolitan police is currently experiencing a crisis in legitimacy: more and more women are realising that those supposedly sent to "protect" women are, by virtue of the job, routinely permitted to enact violence against them. In the wake of Sarah Everard's murder, police brutalised several protestors at her vigil. This show of force was a watershed moment for a new generation: more women are rejecting the 'bad apples' narrative put forward by policing institutions, recognising that the very function of policing places them in danger. Research, lived experience and materialist analysis reveals to us that accessible public transport, community-based night-time safety programmes, staff member training, expansion of socially reproductive labour beyond the family, travelling in groups, decriminalisation of sex work, harm reduction programmes, non-police associated crisis intervention, strong trade union affiliations, and political

education are all tools that could lessen instances of sexual harassment and violence in the home, in the workplace and on the street. When we are cat-called or groped, many of us run to networks of family and friends who can provide us a place to process our emotions and hold negative feeling because we know a police report, filed and never followed up, cannot do this for us. The false promises from a state that continues to abandon the working classes, shifting its responsibility to care for them on to NGOs, charities and corporate entities through what Ruth Wilson Gilmore calls “organised abandonment” will never improve our material conditions. The era of policing via consent, what Aviah Day and Shanice McBean describe as “developing positive relationships with members of the public; and securing the willing participation of the public in the work of maintaining law and order” is slowly being eroded.

Our society is invested in ‘solutions’ to violence that do not prevent more violence from occurring. What a materialist feminist approach enables us to understand is this investment is intimately connected to the devastating effects of neoliberal austerity that continue to ruin lives. As more and more resources are stripped away from us by the state, the possibility of ending violence by meeting people’s material needs lessens and criminalisation grows. These twin processes are features of what a number of abolitionist scholars call a “carceral geography,” which concerns the experiences and relationships that define a

punitive space, space-making as human activity, the spatial makeup of those sites of imprisonment and the systems of control employed by any given penal government and authorities. Neoliberalism emboldens the institutions of prisons and policing through a focus on the individual offender: ‘crime’ as a personal and/or moral failing rather than a social reckoning, using prisons as the sole answer to problems that are social and collective in nature.

We must also connect the existence of anti-harassment campaigns to the real lives of the women the state has imprisoned, who are themselves often victims of sexual or domestic violence. Why is the state permitted to educate the public on bystander invention and then criminalise the women who fight back against their attackers, as is the case of Kiranjit Ahluwalia, Rebecca Searing, Siyanda Mngaza, Sara Thornton and Sally Challen? Why should women trust the police, when the recent undercover policing inquiry has revealed how they routinely infiltrated activist groups, spying and sometimes forming relationships with members of over 1000 political groups from 1968-2010? What good is an anti-harassment campaign if it refuses to understand the root causes of gendered domination? Abolitionists find answers to these questions through concerted efforts to improve material conditions and reestablish the communality central to rethinking, critiquing and abolishing concepts of innocence, safety and criminalisation. By questioning the premise that police and prisons keep us safe, we always arrive back at the networks of human interdependence that sustain

us in urgent moments. “We keep each other safe” – we do so by refusing to contribute to the criminalisation of those fighting to subsist, by focusing on building institutional and interpersonal structures of care that prevent cycles of harm from occurring, by refusing complicity in genocide and imperialist violence committed in our names. By ensuring that every human being has access to nutritious food, community, housing, the ability to learn, change and grow without being exploited. Whether located inside a trade union, domestic violence shelter, mutual aid network, food bank, in schools – feminists in these arenas contribute to the abolitionist struggle daily by refocusing attention on the necessity to divorce organised abandonment from organised violence. By helping build the connections between the production of gender through social relationships and the unequal power relations that feed the class system. Shanice McBean and Aviah Day, founding members of Sisters Uncut, note:

“A revolutionary abolitionist approach... would demand we democratise public funding allocation at the community level, redefine the parameters and definitions of crime, design institutions that exist solely to respond to the needs of ordinary people and redistribute funds not just at the level of public services, but from the wealthy to the global poor in order to tackle the root causes of harm. Abolition must orientate our work towards a future run by people, for people, and not by profit, for profit: this is revolutionary abolitionism.”

Vesting power back from the state in order to initiate processes of redistribution requires us to recognise

abolition as a life-long commitment with no easy solutions, one fundamentally rooted in the knowledge that, despite their promises, the police or the bank can never and will never give us our freedom.

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WHAT STORIES DOES CARCERAL FEMINISM TELL US IN SERVICE OF THE BORDER REGIME?

Leah Cowan

The term ‘carceral feminism’ can be used to describe desperate attempts to breathe life into the desire for criminal legal systems to vanish harm in society. The American sociologist Elizabeth Bernstein coined the term in the late 2000s, when she wrote about the formation of some unlikely ‘political alliances’ between faith groups, activist groups, human rights initiatives, and legal instruments. This unexpected coalition sought to criminalise the ‘demand’ for sex work and to incarcerate “deviant individualism,” while in reality making conditions more dangerous for sex workers. Bernstein’s analysis is useful for understanding other contexts where ‘women’s rights’ are used as a smokescreen for activities that reinforce inequality through galvanising systemic state violence. We see this happening when feminist arguments are levied in support of Britain’s border regime. In Britain, a myriad of government departments and institutions, as well as feminist charities and support services, stake a claim to

defending ‘women’s rights’ and protecting ‘women’s safety,’ and in many cases join hands across policies and laws that reinforce Britain’s border regime.

Bordering in Britain evolved most significantly as a guardrail to prevent former colonial subjects from settling in the hub of the empire. The border sets out who can access the spoils of empire and who cannot, according to their position under ‘racial capitalism.’ The theorist Cedric Robinson coined the term racial capitalism to explain how racialisation is essential to capitalism. Robinson describes how capitalism produces wealth for an elite layer of society through the proliferation of projects that create and leverage fictions of ‘difference’ between human groups, such as trans-Atlantic slavery and colonisation.

Mainstream British feminism, which gathers steam as racial capitalism turns the cranks of industrialisation, has always been invested in protecting the spoils of empire from the countries from which the wealth was extracted. This provides the origin story for the bordering impulse of carceral feminism. For example, early 20th-Century feminist organisations such as the Victoria League, whose membership was made up of the wives of colonial officers and included some high-ranking future suffragists, such as Millicent Fawcett, were primarily concerned with promoting the image of the British empire. These groups leveraged soft (but nonetheless violent) colonial power in areas such as education and social reform. As one MP remarked during a 1910 debate in parliament, where it was suggested that, given the chance, women would vote and act in favour of

empire: “Women [have] brought their brains to the service of the State.” Likewise, when suffragettes themselves began to campaign for women to have the right to vote, the arguments made by the more conservative leadership were couched in explicitly pro-empire terms, noting that women were ‘mothers of the race’ and should be directly involved in political affairs in order to ensure the health and wellbeing of the (white) population.

REPORT AND DEPORT THE VIOLENCE

In the present day, this imperial flavour of feminism expresses itself as carceral feminism, with its predilection towards police, prisons and bordering as essential tools for fighting patriarchal violence. A host of Britain’s gender-based violence (GBV) support services and campaigning organisations continue to support increased prosecutions and legislation that would mandate longer and harsher prison sentences for people prosecuted for domestic abuse and sexual violence. GBV sector organisations are currently campaigning for more prosecutions to counteract the ‘decriminalisation of rape,’ support for longer sentences in domestic homicide cases, and campaigns to make misogyny a hate crime, which would enact a sentence uplift for anyone prosecuted for this offence. These demands seek symbolic indications that GBV is being ‘taken seriously’; however, these ‘wins’ fail to address root causes of harm, and do

nothing to prevent either the recurrence of violence or the expansion of harm that is enacted on wider family networks or communities when individuals are taken from them.

Equally troubling are the structures presented as being protective for survivors, while in reality employing the same steamrolling, saviourist, and criminalising mentalities that Bernstein identifies in her work. For example, Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferences (MARACs) are meetings that are supposed to ‘safeguard’ survivors of domestic violence and are chaired by police officers, without the survivor being present. In reality, MARACs often sacrifice the agency and needs of the survivor at the altar of the state’s desire for a precise, contained, and definitive single victim and perpetrator. As Camille Kumar, managing director of Abortion Support Network illuminates, “MARACs, for many survivors, replicate the power and control dynamics that they are seeking to escape.” Furthermore, in MARACs, immigration enforcement action against the person who has caused harm is sometimes offered as a solution to violence.

Criminal charges, including for any form of GBV, can also directly lead to that person being deported. The 2007 Borders Act states that a person who isn’t a British citizen and receives a prison sentence of over 12 months is automatically eligible for deportation. Consequently, when carceral feminists pose prison as a ‘solution’ to issues of GBV in a context where there is a direct pipeline from prison to deportation, then the border regime is explicitly being weaponised in the name of ‘women’s safety.’ The state

also makes clear its imagined role for the border regime in addressing GBV: an early draft of the 2021 Domestic Abuse Act suggested that “victims of domestic abuse may be best served by returning to their country of origin and, where it is available, to the support of their family and friends.” This clause was rightly described as “bizarre, troubling and indeed misguided” by GBV support services; however, these services simultaneously demand ‘safe reporting’ pathways to the police, which would lead to immigration enforcement outcomes for the people being reported. The reality is that there can be no ‘safe reporting’ to police in a hostile environment, when contact with the criminal legal system leads directly to immigration enforcement.

The clunky duality set up here by carceral feminism: is that bordering is (sometimes) unacceptable when it targets survivors, and tolerable when it punishes those who have caused harm. The idea of there being a clear binary between these two groups is also a tenet of carceral feminism; this way of thinking tries to provide clear and easy answers to complex issues surrounding GBV. A carceral feminist approach tells us that by simply moving someone across a border against their will (an activity that would otherwise be defined as trafficking, if not carried out by the state), harm can be eliminated by placing it out of sight and out of mind. This story has fundamental plot-holes. Deportation not only fails to diffuse harm, but it also abandons a distressed person in a new and possibly unfamiliar location, where they may continue to be harmed and harm others. Here,

carceral feminism reveals a flaw in its logic: it tells us that racialised men are both too violent to be in Britain and must be returned to their communities (which include women) and, at the very same time that (borrowing from the scholar and critic Gayatri Spivak), as racialised women, we must be saved from racialised men.

Carceral feminism partakes in the conjuring of a host of folk devil adversaries of women's liberation, including the racialised domestic abuser, the trafficker, the smuggler, the grooming gang and the nascent terrorist who, we are told by politicians and media commentators, represent extreme forms of patriarchal violence that (allegedly) have no place in Britain. These figures are imagined as the prime targets for a border regime that presents itself as a critical line of defence between women and GBV.

CITIZENSHIP-STRIPPING: GROOMING GANGS AND TERRORISTS

Over the past few decades, bordering and counter-terror have become the active theatres where racism and imperialism are played out by the state in Britain, and carceral feminism provides a vital justification for that work. For example, the government's 2015 Counter-Extremism strategy lists Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) as being caused by extremism, noting that FGM "stems from a wider view that denies women core human rights." The state's solution, it seems,

has been to criminalise FGM – likely driving the practice underground and leaving girls at risk afraid to seek support. The Counter-Extremism strategy also states that British values are "under attack" from the "immediate threat" of "Islamist extremism." The easy eliding of GBV and terrorism becomes commonplace when Britishness is conflated with victimhood – when it is not a person who is presented as vulnerable, but a nation state. As feminist scholar Vasuki Nesiah explains: "With a foregrounding of security threats as emerging everywhere from the bedroom to the battlefield, it should not surprise us that feminist analysis [...] is echoed in arguments made by counter-terrorism experts." Terrorism is framed both as an 'attack' on (white) 'British' values, but also a predictor of GBV as experienced by women from racialised and Muslim communities in particular.

Carceral feminism, in its desire to identify and punish a single perpetrator, inclines itself towards simplistic explanations of why harm happens. As a consequence, entwined as it is with racial capitalism, carceral feminism is quick to tell stories about the supposed inherent violence of racialised men. The border regime provides a simple solution: to disappear this violence. This tendency to leverage immigration enforcement in the name of women's rights has been termed 'femonationalism' by the sociologist Sara Farris. Farris explains how, across Europe, right-wing political forces and feminists end up collaborating by "invoking women's rights to stigmatise Muslim men," and that "Women are presented as victims for whom, if

properly assimilated, space can be made – whereas men are the unredeemable others.”

This was particularly evident in relation to a series of child sexual exploitation cases in England in the early 2010s. The media furore that was whipped up around these cases hinged on the suggestion that there had been an institutional failure to question the men’s activities specifically because they were Asian and Muslim men, and that social workers and police feared being accused of racism. The narrative surrounding these child grooming cases was also enabled by a series of crucial details, as academic Waqas Tufail notes, including that other cases where white men were sexually abusing children received far less media reporting. Furthermore, Tufail explains that due to under-reporting, “the true extent of the number of Asian female victims of child sexual abuse is very likely to be higher than is currently known.” The idea that abuse had been overlooked because of the perpetrators’ racialisation appeared to be unfounded. Tufail concludes that, instead, “the contempt police officers often hold for minority groups was trumped in these instances by their contempt for these vulnerable young girls.”

Nonetheless, a series of racist tirades in mainstream media framed as outraged defence of the survivors of grooming added fuel to the fire of right-wing groups. In 2017, Labour MP Sarah Champion published an article in *The Sun* stating that “Britain has a problem with British Pakistani men raping and exploiting white girls” and claimed that “these people are predators and the common denominator is their ethnic

heritage.” Fellow feminist MP Jess Phillips corroborated these claims, commenting that “The British Pakistani-Bangladeshi community, certainly where I am, has issues about women’s roles in a family, in society. That’s the truth.” These assertions – that there is something unmalleably and exceptionally patriarchal and misogynistic about a person or community because of their religious and cultural background – have fanned Islamophobic flames that take form both as immigration law and counter-terror policy, as well as acts of terrorism themselves. In 2019, a white supremacist who killed 51 people at a mosque in New Zealand was found to have written ‘for Rotherham’ on an ammunition clip.

Some of the men who had abused young girls were threatened with having their citizenship stripped from them, although the Home Office has refused to release data on whether any of the men have been deported. This same punishment is also leveraged against people accused of terrorism, those who we are told pose an ‘immediate threat’ to British values. Bordering, however, is a shape-shifting device that travels easily between its targets. A clause in the 2022 Nationality and Borders Act to strip citizenship without prior warning was brought in after a High Court ruling against the government, which had unlawfully removed a British woman’s citizenship without informing her. The woman, who was living in Al Roj refugee camp in Syria, had discovered her citizenship had been stripped when she wrote to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and asked to return home. The ruling also followed the case

of Shamima Begum, a schoolgirl from East London who travelled to Syria in 2015 after being groomed online by an Islamic State fighter and smuggled into the country with the assistance of a Canadian intelligence agent. Begum had her citizenship stripped in 2019. Arguably, these two women alone faced high levels of GBV: grooming, child marriage, statutory rape, and the inherent vulnerability of being a single woman in a refugee camp. Yet, the logic of carceral feminism does not concern itself with racialised women who are subjected to the very counter-terror laws that stake a claim to ‘women’s safety.’ Bordering tactics always spread outwards to find new targets, and carceral feminism provides a justification for its expansion.

MODERN SLAVERY AND DETENTION

Another key focus of the border regime dressed up as ‘protecting women’ over the past decade has been ‘modern slavery.’ The 2015 Modern Slavery Act, introduced by self-identifying feminist Theresa May, is explicitly a ‘law and order’ tactic for, supposedly, reducing modern slavery by criminalising the ‘gangs’ that facilitate exploitation. The problem with ‘modern slavery’ as a framing, as the former adviser to the UK’s Anti-slavery Commissioner Emily Kenway has outlined, is not that the harms that it highlights do not exist – certainly, they do. The issue is that many of the clauses in the Act take a ‘deport the violence’ approach.

In offering bordering (eg criminalisation, incarceration and deportation) as supposed remedies to modern slavery, the victims of inequality (which are *all* parties) do not acquire economic justice and safety, and the larger system of global inequality that drives exploitation is left untouched.

The single most effective solution for Modern Slavery would be to abolish the border and its laws, which make people vulnerable to exploitation, but this does not suit the state’s agenda. We must note the key financial motivation behind governments’ mealy-mouthed lamentations about modern slavery; for example, the three companies that provide statutory accommodation to victims of trafficking have paid over £121m to their shareholders since 2019. When public resources are ploughed into bordering, the only winners are the private companies investing in the infrastructure of the border.

A well-resourced border regime does not distinguish between a binary of victims and perpetrators: the border regime increases profit by any means necessary. It is for this reason that Derwentside, a new women-only detention centre in County Durham was opened in 2021, joining two other detention centres that also detain women: Yarl’s Wood in Bedfordshire and Dungavel in South Lanarkshire. Carceral feminism signals a failure in collective struggle, in stark contrast to the solidarity built by women at the sharp edge of the border regime. In 2018, people detained in Yarl’s Wood went on hunger strike and released a list of demands that included “End indefinite detention” and “LGBT+ people’s sexuality to be believed,” in response

to the draconian and humiliating ‘assessment’ process for LGBT people seeking asylum. We must recognise that the hunger strikers did not demand freedoms for women only, but for all people oppressed by the border regime. As the campaigning collective the All-African Women’s Group explains, connecting the oppression of the border regime directly with the context of racial capitalism:

“We all have the right to be here in the UK. African and other Third World people have contributed over centuries to the wealth in the UK. We have suffered enough through imperial conquest, slave trades, proxy wars, Western backed dictatorships, rape and other torture... and through long treacherous journeys getting to the UK. We demand the right to asylum, safety and protection.”

CONCLUSION

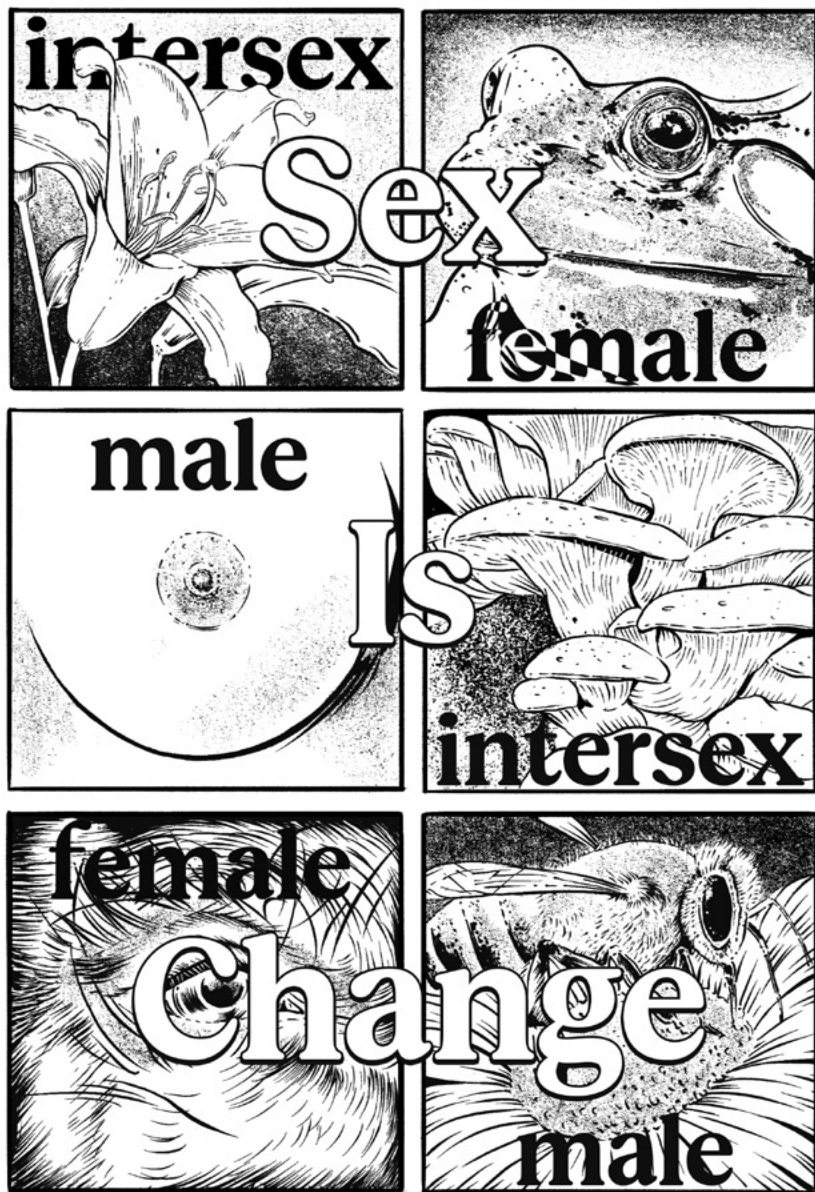
Carceral feminism follows an incomplete logic. It fails, either by deliberate strategy or careless inattention, to ask a simple question when presented with a so-called solution to violence: “what happens afterwards?” In its enthusiasm for the quick fixes of bordering, carceral feminism fails to peer beyond the moment of punishment. ‘Deport the violence’ doesn’t ever truly disappear the structural violence of GBV, it just amplifies and shifts around harm in new locations.

What do we learn from carceral feminism’s use of bordering? It is critical to disentangle ourselves from the easy binary of

victim and villain, and to recognise the structural roots of harm that will form any successful harm-reduction efforts. It is essential to reject a punitive approach to harm that sees bordering as a solution to GBV, not in order to overlook the severity of GBV, but because solving the root causes of violence is the only way to interrupt cycles of harm.

Carceral feminism is a project located in the realm of ideas, dreams, hopes and fears. This is not to say that there is anything remotely generative, mystical, expansive or celestial about the notions carceral feminism produces. On the contrary, carceral feminism encourages us to populate our waking thoughts with recycled bogey-men and worn-out folk devils. It trades in shadowy, racialised figures ‘out there’ that must seemingly (and ambiguously) be guarded against, recognising violence as something all-encompassing and ever-present, and yet at the same time as something we can somehow siphon off, isolate, and incarcerate. There is a way of out this delusion. We can grapple with the fundamental root causes of harm so that the wind is sucked from the sails of carceral feminism, and instead allow ourselves to be carried, in bright sun and on buoyant currents, towards abolitionist horizons.

Leah Cowan is a writer and an advice worker at a charity supporting families with No Recourse to Public Funds who are facing homelessness and destitution. Leah has written two books: *Border Nation: a Story of Migration* (Pluto Press, 2021) and *Why Would Feminists Trust the Police?* (Verso, 2024).



ON THE BASELESSNESS OF SEX

Emma Heaney

What honour is conferred by the individual identity term woman that is violated or watered down by the use of the collective terms menstruator, gestator, or person with a uterus? No one knows, because the legions of people, TERFs¹ at their helm, who disavow the latter terms' use ("I'm/She's a woman; don't call me/her a ____.") never articulate why they respond so negatively to these terms. Relatedly, what valour do TERFs think they're hoarding by trying to withhold this word from trans women? They say this gatekeeping is about the criterion of having endured the trauma of girlhood, positing a homogenous experience that all cis women and only cis women must claim (revealing that they have never met a femme child). Being assigned female, which is the only source of misogynist pain, is somewhat healed by the identity woman. Woman is the spoil of enduring feminising violence.

One of the highlights of feminist writing in 2024 was critic Andrea Long Chu's forceful defence of the right of children

1. Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminist

to access paediatric trans healthcare in her March 11th New York Magazine cover story entitled “Freedom of Sex.” This defence was the essay’s telos: its path wound through two propulsive observations. The first was a diagnosis of the enduring negative effects of the elision of the materiality of bodies in the foundational work of queer theory, by which she means Judith Butler’s two books on gender from the early 1990s. The second was the clear outline of the otherwise discordant political forces that have recently converged around the goal of eliminating trans people. Alongside the MAGA evangelicals and ideological TERFs, the most influential agents of the astonishingly rapid onset sea-change in American public opinion from confused indifference to eliminationist zeal are those Chu terms TARLs.² It is TARLs who regularly write opinion columns in America’s remaining legacy media that claim that trans life is a recently emergent fad that has gone too far. The way to combat this three-headed hydra is to insist on the right to change one’s sex. Securing the right to change sex requires, for Chu, engagement with “the reality of biological sex.”

But what is this changeable terrain, sex? Recent work by the historian of science Beans Velocci demonstrates that, for scientists of all stripes, sex has never existed as a unified entity. Rather, the qualities and capacities that designate a person, animal, insect, or fungus as male or female vary. The changeability of individual bodies, the tendency of hormones to fluctuate, the quotidian absenting of organs,

2. Trans-Agnostic Reactionary Liberal

and the transformations of structures used to assign sex, serve to further undermine the sanctity of the category sex. Then there is the longer history of intersex existence that is marshalled as evidence of the inadequacy of sex as a question of two, eternal, and mutually exclusive.

Some argue that this variety may be true in the exceptional case or in the theories of endocrinologists, but what of the social reality of female sex? Surely, the elimination of the term woman, a project that this internally diverse milieu attribute to all trans people (including trans women) and their allies, denies us the proper vocabulary for describing those affected by a transhistorical and physiologically grounded set of vulnerabilities, primarily to rape and coerced pregnancy.

But I contend that sex as a naturalised category, in fact, impedes political expediency. Rather than identity protections, material demands ensure bodily autonomy and wellness. Consider the following thumbnail juxtaposition: in 1974, in *Geduldig vs. Aiello*, the United States Supreme Court decided against California women who sued the state for excluding pregnancy-related disabilities from the state’s disability insurance program, claiming that this exclusion violates the Fourteenth Amendment’s protections against discrimination on the basis of sex. The court found that the law could stand because the inclusion of pregnancy disability would be too costly and, crucially, because not all women have pregnancies or births, therefore pregnancy-related rights are not sex-based rights. In the decades

since that decision, many states, including California, have developed plans to cover pregnancy-related disabilities, naming the prospective beneficiaries as “employees disabled by pregnancy” and those potentially affected as “pregnant workers.” Not all states are required to provide such resources as a result of the Supreme Court Decision. This focus on access to resources and protections rooted in a bodily capacity provided for a feminist outcome without the corollary production of an exclusionary identity-based group. Put otherwise, the feminist outcome of protecting pregnant workers did not require the forwarding of cisness as a basis for such rights.

Consider an outcome in which sex did serve to address a workplace injustice. In the 2020 case *Harris Funeral Homes Inc. vs. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission*, a 6-3 majority ruled that Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 protects trans people from employment discrimination and therefore when embalmer Aimee Stephens was fired by her boss at Harris Funeral Home when she came out as a trans woman, that act was illegal. This decision boiled down to Harris’s lawyers’ contention that the Court had already established a precedent that firing an employee for “violating sex stereotypes” was illegal in the case of a cis gender non-conforming person, in this case a masculine woman who, the lawyers reasoned, violated the sex stereotypes associated with her assigned sex. The same reasoning, they argued, protected Aimee Stephens in her perceived non-conformity with her assigned sex.

I am very happy that this case was decided as it was and I love Aimee Stephens and would hope to never do anything to minimise her heroic struggle and legal victory. But consider: Stephens’ employer admitted to firing her for being trans. Following this decision, if a boss makes such an admission, he risks his employee bringing suit against him and winning. Sex, in this sense, provides protection. But which workers will be able to bring such suits and how will they prove transphobic intent, especially following the court’s message that you can no longer be explicit about such intent? Every pregnant person, in contrast, benefits from the legal protection of pregnancy-related disability and against pregnancy-related discrimination, in the places where such protections exist, regardless of identity. This is just one example of how politics that attend to collective bodily realities provide superior feminist outcomes and more practically available remunerations against historical legacies of misogyny than do identity-based claims.

There is a long history since the queer politics of the 1990s to suggest that downplaying the material realities (both organic and economic) of sex offer expanded queer and trans horizons. I am against this legacy. It is my claim here that we don’t talk nearly enough about these material realities and that doing so, absent the crushingly stupid and destructive politics of cisness, is not only possible but essential. It is TERFs who constantly cite these structures – cervixes, ovaries, gametes, uteruses – and yet have nothing to say about them. It is TERFs who ontologise vulnerability to rape, whilst denying its social reality and attempting to drive

wedges between populations who are disproportionately affected by rape.

Cisness confers the right not to have to talk about your body as an object. It confers the right to be able to celebrate the things your body does (have a baby, dunk a basketball) while being discreetly screened from impudent investigations of those activities. Womanhood, transversally produced, is burdened by the imperative to be embodied without the right to speak about it. The right to discretion becomes an imperative while your body is available for evaluation and critique. TERFism and the liberal and ultra right-wing iterations of transphobia – the two heads that branch from TERFism, which it spawned and now feeds like a parent bird – delight in the feminising violence it enacts on all trans people by talking about bodies, graphically and with glee. But for all this, TERFS have very little to say about the structures and functions that they say define sex. This obsession that somehow avoids saying anything substantive about its object is where the sardonic soft butch prudery of Kathleen Stock meets Nancy Mace’s wild-eyed bachelorette party sadism. The former has made a major career pivot to being a professional eye roller and the latter an unhinged bathroom door photographer, but these gestures are the sole substance of their claims.

Bodies are essential. It is the ideology of sex that is expendable, neither descriptive nor politically useful. Sex is change. Cisness confers the right to engage in sex change with little medical gatekeeping and free of political attack:

millions of prescriptions for hormones to enable pregnancy, address the effects of menopause, intervene in an unwanted decrease in testosterone, delay an early puberty, or lessen the risk of cancer’s return attest to these quotidian and supported bodily changes. Insurance covers the reconfiguration of genitals that are injured or the common splitting produced by delivering a baby. As Chu points out, young people who demand access to paediatric trans healthcare are not making an unusual claim to sex change, they are simply asking that this right be extended to them. Recognition of these realities demonstrates that while sex is baseless, sex change is universal.

The goal of feminism is not to describe women’s pain and encourage us to cathect to that pain as the source of our self-regard. The goal of feminism is to end misogynist degradation and the hierarchy of social values that subtend and reproduce that degradation. The solidarities that will unmake this world and are making the next are served by frank and direct descriptions of what bodies do and need, unobscured by the false unity of sex. These solidarities are enacted when people move together to satisfy those needs and protect those bodies.

Emma Heaney is a communist teacher and writer living with her two children on unceded Lenape land, otherwise known as Queens, New York. Her books are *The New Woman* (Northwestern, 2017), *Feminism Against Cisness* (Duke, 2024), and *This Watery Place* (Pluto, 2025).



A LETTER FETISH: TO AN UNKNOWN LESBIAN, LIVING IN NEWCASTLE IN THE 1970S

Nazmia Jamal

The term 'archive of feelings' puts pressure on traditional notions of the archive by asking that it extend itself to encompass feelings of all kinds, even though emotional experiences and intimacies, including sexual and queer ones, may be ephemeral and hence only accessible indirectly via archival documents. Although feelings can be described in textual and visual representations, the model for the archive of feelings is quite often that of the fetish, by which I mean – following the logic of both Freud and Marx but reading them somewhat queerly – that objects derive their significance from the feelings attached to them; not because of their intrinsic meaning or referentiality.

Ann Cvetkovich, 2009

Cardiff, Wales
October 2022

Dear friend,

You don't know me, but I have kept your letter with me for at least 25 years now. I pull it out and read it every so often;

I see myself in it more and more. It has moved with me from house to house – sometimes it gets pinned to the wall, sometimes it is tucked safely away, but I always know where it is and, often, I wonder where (and who) you are.

One day, when I was a teenager, sometime in the mid-1990s, I was rummaging in a pile of second-hand books in Castle Arcade in Cardiff when a folded piece of green paper fell out of a book. I don't remember what the book was, but I had spotted something interesting on the paper, slipped it into whatever book I was buying that day and took it home. That was your letter: an A5 piece of paper, the colour of grass on a spring day, folded in half to make a notecard, and then folded in half again lengthways – perhaps to be used as a bookmark by you. Over the years the card has been stuck, shoved and grubbily pawed over. It is hard to know now, but I think all the stains are mine – the spreading Blutack grease spots and an inexplicable line of rust. The notecard, produced by Moss Side Community Press Women's Co-op (this printed on the back along with their surprising address on Princess Road) features a cover design that really doesn't sit that well in 2025: the classic Women's Liberation Movement symbol of the raised fist inside a Venus symbol was what had caught my eye when I first found the card, but here the symbol is being held on one side – protectively I think – by a small, naked girl of about four. She stands as high as the symbol, black hair waving about her shoulders, belly slightly out, unsmiling and staring out at whoever tries to look back. Obviously, feminists don't make cards with

naked children on them anymore. I wonder what the idea was behind this one and what you thought when you bought it – if you did buy it, because you might have found it or been given it. I don't know and maybe you don't remember.

The Moss Side Community Press in Manchester became a Women Only Co-op in 1976 so that card must date from after that, but when did you acquire it? Where? Because your letter was not written in Manchester, but in Heaton, Newcastle. Your address is printed neatly in the top right-hand corner of the inside page, which you'd turned on its side to use the page like note paper rather than a card. You didn't include the date (and since you never finished the letter, you never signed it) so when (and who) you are will have to stay a mystery. Someone in a proper archive might have been able to work this out – cross referenced something maybe – but since you remain in my personal collection for now, you'll remain nameless. If I was a graphologist I might try and read into your tight, round, neat writing – the fancy z and the r, the space you save by using + instead of and. You write in such straight lines. Like me you enjoy throwing in a bracket for good measure every so often too.

When I found you, I was a devoted letter writer. I progressed from those international pen-pal catalogues you got at school, to writing long confessional letters to friends that I would see every day at school anyway, and then joined the network of postal fanzines sending endless letters to people all over the country. Looking at your letter now I think you must have been very young when you wrote it; you and

your girlfriend live together but are going back to college to do A-Levels or Art Foundation – I think you must have still been in your late teens perhaps and probably still in your hometown. When I first read you, we could have been similar ages, but the freedom and adventure you write about was very far from my strict, schoolgirl reality.

In the beginning, I thought you were writing to a friend, but now after all these years I read all sorts of imagined emotions and hesitations and frustrations into your lines. Today, I think you must be writing to an ex. In the mid-90s, I did not know what a letter to an ex might look like, but I do now and the pages of my books and the bottoms of drawers are littered with my own drafts and abandoned missives that also have never been sent. I think you missed her. An ex-lover or a lost close friend. Just as difficult and confusing to lose. The letter is addressed using a pet name, I think, a slightly odd masculinisation of a common English woman's name. It makes me think of how I refer to my own friends and lovers.

Did you ever find your friend I wonder, after the attempts to call and asking her sister to no avail? Was your reunion warm and fun as you shared news over a pint and maybe pulled out some photos from your wallet? Or maybe when Facebook started you found her again but didn't send a friend request because her life (or yours) had followed a very different (less queer?) path than you'd planned together. Sometimes I imagine you at Greenham – you seem like someone who would have gone. I imagine all the women in

your letter holding hands – knowingly or unknowingly – at the Embrace the Base action. Maybe we've even met but, because I don't know your name and you don't know I've got your letter, we will never know.

Your letter is unfinished and only 27 lines long, but it creates a whole world (one I have no business being in, but here we are) crisscrossed with a web of friends (you mention at least 14 people by name) and six (!) cats: T. Time, Smith and Pudding, who has three 'perfect' kittens. If Dykes To Watch Out For was set in Heaton, this would be it. Aside from your girlfriend and the many cats, you had two other women (a couple?) staying in the house when you wrote this letter. Someone referred to only by their initials had been causing mayhem – borrowing another friend's car, which got 'nicked last night.' Is this a time you remember well?

There are grim details: you'd heard your friend might be working 'at a sewage farm or something,' a detail you rush over. I mean what do you say about that really? And warm updates: someone important to you both (a child? a dog?) is 'well + as rumbustious as ever.' What a busy and tight world you lived in. Did you and your friend build this web of people together? It feels like you were at the centre, lived in the house people congregated at, were the person (or pair) who kept everyone's stories safe. You list names of people (a pair of boys, a pair of girls...) who have asked about your friend, careful to caveat this with 'occasionally' but then slipping into unguarded longing yourself, writing, 'as magic mushroom season approaches, I think of you too.'

There is a story at the heart of your letter that I can't quite get at. When you talk about your home you write that you and your lover 'live here now – we've almost finished painting out the ghosts.' Did you live in the house before, with the person you are writing to? As friends or lovers? Was it just her house? What is the story of the house? Who are the ghosts needed chasing out? I feel cosy reading about the visitors and cats and return to education, and how your current relationship has flourished in spite of the need for domestic exorcism: 'We still have our ups + downs + flat outs but all in all we seem to still love each other.' And I revel in the delicious revelation of your polyamorous adventures: 'This spring we both had affairs with [X] + [Y] (one each) but it didn't seem to work out really – can't think why not!' The humour in your tone and the pragmatic parenthesis sound so familiar.

I wonder why you didn't finish your letter. Did you or your house guests suggest a trip to the pub or the kittens start tugging at your sleeve? Did you fold up the letter and shove it in a book because you wanted to hide it? Maybe you just gave up on the idea of finding an address for your friend and tucked the paper away, adding it to the millions of other unsent letters out there.

One day, your letter, which forms part of my hoard of treasure now, will get added to the deposit of papers I donated to the Lesbian Archive at the Women's Library in Glasgow several years ago – keen to connect with future lost brown dykes wondering about their place in queer British

life. For the longest time I assumed that you must be white, a white feminist default figure... but I don't know that. I don't know your name or really anything about you. I sign things obsessively now, speaking to a future friend looking for a Muslim name amongst the lesbian flotsam. I wonder if you would mind being in an archive (especially mine) but your letter has become something else now too, because finding it marked the beginning of my own love affair with lesbian ephemera – items that document the texture and joyful largeness of our lives. Thank you for that. It has been nice knowing you so long.

In sisterhood,

Nazmia

Nazmia Jamal is a community historian, teacher and curator whose work explores black feminisms and queer feminisms in late twentieth century Britain.



A FEMINIST ARCHAEOLOGY OF SELF BY WAY OF WORDS

Sophie K. Rosa

"Write your self. Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth. Our naphtha will spread, throughout the world, without dollars - black or gold - nonassessed values that will change the rules of the old game."

Hélène Cixous, *The Laugh of the Medusa*

BRAINSTORM

I am not sure whether this part is a recollection of my life cycle or a recollection of the news cycle, but – around 2005 – I recall the prohibition of the word ‘brainstorm.’ I remember a teacher announcing that from here on we should refer to ‘thought showers’ rather than ‘brainstorms,’ lest we offend people with epilepsy. Upon further research now, it turns out this particular linguistic sensitivity was disseminated to local authorities by some early aughts civil servants. Eager to obey and desperate not to offend, I was immediately on board, silently disappointed in myself when

I so much as thought of the word ‘brainstorm.’

Apart from a great-aunt in Finland who I scarcely saw, I did not know anyone with epilepsy, and the little my adolescent brain had absorbed about the condition probably retained aspects of its cultural and historical associations with mysticism and possession: being seized by spirits. It seemed terrifying, and I did not want to add insult to injury with injurious vocabulary.

As ever, I had a troubling sense that everything rested on language, that words were make or break. I observed that the women around me tended to be more careful and also cleverer with their words: better curated rhetoric, more sensitive, and adept with silence. I learned to proceed with oral caution.

Five years after Brainstorm Gate, at nineteen, I had my first seizure. On a day trip to London with my university boyfriend, walking along, apparently I said something like “I feel weird” – and then collapsed unconscious into full-body convulsions.

From then, volition was no longer reliably enough mine. (Was it ever?) I was consumed by the sudden contingency of my consciousness and decidedly not offended by the word ‘brainstorm.’ Sometimes, I found myself ruminating on it, grateful for the signifier. My brain was, actually, storming.

After a seizure (in the so-called postictal state), I was totally lost:

like lost in the world,

like lost for words.

Language escaped me in incomprehensible ways. I had no idea what to say, how to say, or why – like when, as I do not recall, having recently regained consciousness, I told an attractive paramedic that my boyfriend who had called the ambulance was not *really* my boyfriend.

Though eventually managed by medication, for almost a decade the storms wrought havoc. They surged infrequently, unpredictably:

brain in disarray,

words all over the place,

meaning shifting beneath my feet.

IDIOPATHIC

An unknown word, a new word. The neurologist diagnosed me, a few seizures and scans down the line, with Idiopathic Generalised Epilepsy. Idiopathic, I learned, meant something like meaningless – something inexplicable, of unknown origin. As someone with obsessive tendencies, this unknowable diagnosis was preoccupying to say the least.

Before this time, I had a normal amount of naive faith in Western medical science’s paternalistic care. The infantile

fantasy that doctors know everything about my body, understand everything about my body, can cure everything about my body, can be a comfort.

I quickly ascertained how little the Daddy doctors actually knew about what my body was doing, much less why. Still, for a while I looked forward to my neurology consultations as encounters with expert authority, moments where I might be granted self-knowledge. In reality, at best, the neurologists were kind, but beyond a diagnosis that was a scientific way of saying ‘we do not know why your brain is dramatically malfunctioning,’ they had no answers to my many questions. The diagnosis itself became something like an existential uncertainty – exposure therapy in its own right. It also became a door to other ways of knowing.

In time – crucially, it must be said, once the seizures themselves seemed to have stopped – I began to find a sort of appreciation for the way my condition escaped or exceeded total capture by Western medicine. As the poet and essayist Anne Boyer writes in *The Undying*, “A body in mysterious discomfort exposes itself to medicine hoping to meet a vocabulary with which to speak of suffering in return. If that suffering does not meet sufficient language, those who endure that suffering must come together to invent it.”

Many of us who find ourselves at the limits of, or excluded by, the medical establishment (such as people seeking reproductive and gender-affirming healthcare), realise a new kind of agency. Like when a male doctor laughingly dismissed my menstrual health concerns as “women’s

problems,” prompting me to self-educate and explore holistic remedies alongside comradely menstruators.

Not knowing, I gave myself permission to explain myself to myself, along different lines, to consult and treat myself differently.

GRAND MAL

My seizure type was until recently commonly known as ‘grand mal,’ or ‘great sickness.’ Now, doctors call them ‘tonic-clonic,’ referring to the dual seizure phases: initially, the tonic phase, involving total muscle stiffening, involuntary noises, and the loss of consciousness, falling. Then, the tonic phase: rapid, rhythmic muscle jerking. Such seizures usually last a few minutes, as mine always did – but five or longer and there is a significant risk of death. Brought up to be death-defyingly risk averse, my body was rebelling, rolling the dice.

The seizures became a kind of bad influence, a shameful associate. No one understood them, and on the rare occasions I brought them up, people seemed spooked. I too was haunted – by associations. Haunted by histories of fascist eugenics that aimed to eliminate people like me; by the ‘ugly laws’ in mid-nineteenth century to mid-twentieth century United States, which criminalised disability deemed unsightly in public space; by the seventeenth-century Salem witch trials, where women were shunned and burned as

witches, as demonically possessed, for shaking when they shouldn't. People with epilepsy were banned from migrating to Australia until 1989.

Seizures' association with moral degeneracy has been persistent. Until recently, I wasn't consciously aware of most of this denunciation, but my shame suggested something inside me had absorbed it. Sometimes people unknowingly dig it up – like when the organiser of a group psychedelic experience expressed concern about me scaring the other participants, should I seize. Witnessing my seizures had indeed hysterised more than one man at that point: one was sobbing when I regained consciousness, another in a state of frozen terror.

HYSTERIA

In recent years, I have found it helpful to understand my seizures as a form of language. What they were saying, exactly, might not be for me to know, but they were a communication all the same. If I can never truly understand them – at least not in the scientific sense – I know that I must try not to disavow them. I must listen to them, in all their incoherence.

Now training in psychoanalysis, seizures have new associations in the misogynistic histories of madness and in particular of 'hysteria' – a vague, thousands-of-years-old diagnosis referring variously through the ages to apparently mostly female complaints such as seizures, morbid thoughts

and mood swings, and put down to things like women's weak constitutions, wandering wombs, original sin, demonic possession and being too horny.

From the dawn of psychoanalysis, the body has been bound up with investigations of the psyche. People, especially women, who shake when they shouldn't have been of particular interest, certainly sometimes to their detriment, though also – often for the first time – becoming subjects who were invited to speak freely and be listened to. In the earliest phases of psychoanalysis, seizures were often considered part and parcel of hysteria, the idea being that such physical symptoms spoke to unconscious phantasies.

During her treatment, one of Freud's earliest patients, Frau Emmy von N – a hysteric whose symptoms included convulsions – repeatedly demanded "Keep still! - Don't say anything! - Don't touch me!" She rarely receives credit for her contributions to the psychoanalytic method.

Whilst 'hysteria' was removed from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) diagnostic classifications in the 1980s, various diagnoses remain that speak to the same symptoms. 'Conversion disorder,' for example – which the DSM says is two to three times more common in women than men – refers to somatic symptoms attributed to psychological factors such as trauma. One such example is psychogenic non-epileptic seizures (PNES). Whilst my seizures were epileptic rather than psychogenic, their idiopathic nature blurred this line. The bodymind is ever uncertain.

The psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan built upon Freud's notion of hysteria, reworking it into one of various non-pathological psychic structures someone might have. Lacan's hysteric is a both/and kind of person. They interrogate predetermined, stable identities, whilst demanding the other tell them something about themselves that they never can really know, that they wouldn't really exactly want to. Their dividedness and ambivalence, really, is what gets them going.

NON-BINARY

There is something about the nature of truth that gets productively blurred by the psychosomatic. In patriarchal discourse, the emotional realm is ostensibly a lie, a guise for another, realer reality. Having seizures with no scientific explanation that many of my loved ones have never even witnessed, then, meant I sometimes subjected myself to cruel and dizzying suspicion: about my own sense, self, sense of self.

I looked to the realm of psychogenic seizures for answers and found a surprising public solidarity between people who have seizures of all kinds, no matter their genesis. I imagined there might, instead, be a Cartesian tussle over legitimacy, over the terrain of reality. Perhaps both disturbances' provenance in the brain and their shared stigma brings the psyche into a different kind of view. And besides, the disorders themselves defy binary categorisation:

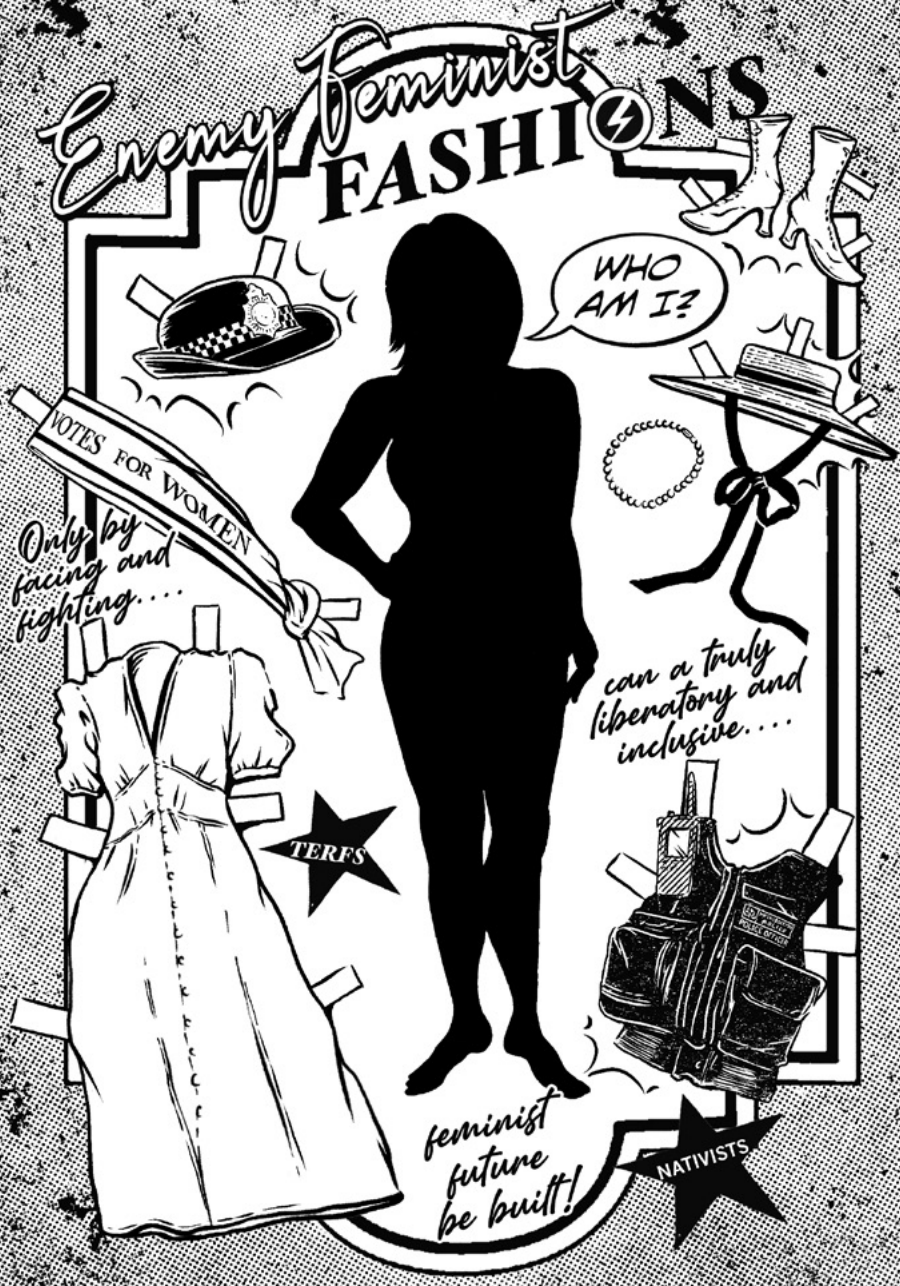
some people experience both types of seizures, and some people – like me – experience epileptic seizures with no known physical cause.

Freud believed in “the bisexual nature of hysterical symptoms” – in short, that beneath a particular symptom would likely lie both straight and gay unconscious phantasies, such that uncovering only one might well leave the symptom intact. There is something about being on the brink here, that entails a categorical refusal, try as one might, to be known.

At the limits of medical knowledge, I was met with the establishment's castration, introduced to the possibilities of self-authorship. Have you heard about the maternal revolt, mothers smuggling cannabis into the country to treat children with epilepsy? Lawlessness: the mother of invention.

I have had to invent most of what I think I know about my young adult body's occasional, dramatic flirtation with death. Here's an indisputable fact, though: during the mushroom trip, lying on the floor, the wooden ceiling's knots morphed into an infinite sapphic orgy and, since then, I have never had a seizure. So, there's that.

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FEMINISTS AGAINST WOMEN

Sophie Lewis

Sometimes a feminist is a feminist even though she dedicates her time to the dispossession and ostracism of a group of women.

Female anti-feminism and right-wing feminism are distinct phenomena, yet contrary to some views on the matter, both exist in the West. The first category is relatively well-established: to evidence it, one can point to available data which shows that 12 percent of the women who voted in Britain's 2024 general election voted for the Andrew Tate fan Nigel Farage; meanwhile, in the U.S., 46 percent of women voters chose Donald Trump. On the other hand, when it comes to pinpointing a feminism on the Right, there is no consensus. Systems of white supremacy and imperial capitalism shaped the birth of European feminisms, often moulding them ideologically. Yet today, whenever anti-trans, nativist, and anti-abortion figures of the Euro-American moderate and far-right self-designate as feminists, they are routinely received by others as insincere, invalid, or *prima facie* impossible. (The right-wing Heritage Foundation-funded group "Women's Liberation Front" is a case in point.) "You

can't have a right-wing feminist," says the lesbian "socialist" columnist Julie Bindel, emblematising this view even as she spearheads the assault on trans lives.

In my book *Enemy Feminisms: TERFs, Policewomen and Girlbosses Against Liberation*, I conversely offer a 200-year overview of cissexist, colonialist, nativist, white-nationalist, whorephobic, capitalist, eugenicist, carceral, and even pro-forced birth forms of Western women's rights activism. I take these enemy feminisms seriously, even as I insist that left antifascists must oppose them, because reckoning with these self-described feminisms is necessary for understanding how to defeat them. While feminist commitment is a necessary ingredient in any rigorous or principled antifascism, some articulations of women's rights can be and have been fascisms.

This possibility becomes especially apparent in the context of mass disillusionment with liberal feminism and amid various discursive exoduses from the scene of postfeminism, such as "tradwifery," "the femosphere," and "4B." Well-justified reflexes towards radicality, rejecting received forms of feminist mobilisation, sometimes collapse into nihilist, individualist, edgily trad, or misandrist-separatist femopessimisms. The feminism of cisness, however, has spread like a pogrom. Today, it is unsurprising – even in the U.S., where the phenomenon caught fire only more recently – to find self-described feminists at the forefront of policymaking to deny gender-affirming healthcare or make bathrooms and locker rooms cissexual at all costs, in the name of women's rights.

There is an awful sense of familiarity about this latest right-wing counterrevolution in feminism. When it comes to mob-like zeal spurring sisters-in-arms toward a purge of "the Unwoman" – a chameleonic figure of fantasy who threatens to usurp, invade, or dishonour womanhood – we have been here before, multiple times. Fifty years ago, a minority of cissexists – notably the group Gutter Dykes – mounted physical and ideological attacks on trans lesbian organisers in the American women's liberation movement, whom they charged with "invading and draining our lesbian community." But far from inherent to the movement, anti-trans feminism first arose as the counterinsurgent retort to sex-radical utopianism: a pessimistic response to a gender- and family-abolitionist efflorescence that was generally welcoming to trans women and aimed to communalise care beyond the private household while generalising "transsexuality [sic]," as Shulamith Firestone put it, towards letting a thousand genders bloom. Building on Alice Echols's historical account of the U.S. women's liberation movement's fragmentation, I locate anti-trans feminism's origins in the swamping of revolutionary feminism by a reactionary female biological and cultural nationalism circa 1973 – one that's been rising to the top of "TERF Island" institutions ever since, yet still calls itself *radical* to this day.

Insights into the shape of this counterrevolution can be found even further back. Over a hundred years ago, the modern feminist project of "women's policing" took off in Britain as an anticommunist, antisemitic, anti-vice crusade against a fictional sex-trafficking panic about so-called

“white slavery” that was itself a backlash against anti-state, sex worker solidarity feminism. One of the main innovators of this “cop feminism,” the lesbian radical and ex-suffragette militant Mary Allen, was a passionate devotee of Mussolini and later Hitler. She was not alone in seeing the fascist “corporate state” as the future of women’s emancipation: while many disillusioned suffragists turned to socialism and communism in the interwar period, one radical feminist UK thinktank designated the soon-to-be Blackshirt leader Sir Oswald Mosley parliament’s top member. Several British ex-suffragettes joined the British Union of Fascists and came to believe that “Fascism alone will complete the work begun by the militant women from 1906 to 1914.”

Meanwhile, in the U.S., the Ku Klux Klan’s woman leaders and spokeswomen aligned themselves with the feminist movement’s radical fringe by supporting the Equal Rights Amendment when it was first introduced in 1923, just as they had supported the Nineteenth Amendment (granting votes for some women) – as a weapon against Black voters. Nowadays, people tend only to be familiar with the events of fifty years later, post-Jim Crow and the Voting Rights Act’s passage, when segregationist White women mobilised with Phyllis Schlafly to oppose feminism and the ERA. But the truth is: back in the twenties, “KKK feminism” advocated for female access to divorce and child custody, and berated “the selfish man who insists that woman’s only place is in the home.” Clearly, these race-hierarchised visions of sexed emancipation – for “respectable” non-sexworking white cis women only – were fascistic. But if

they were *not really feminism*, then neither was the thought of Mary Wollstonecraft or Susan Anthony.

Much contemporary thought treats the buzz-cut, white-hooded, and black-bloused examples I’ve just mentioned as non-feminisms, reasoning that these self-described fascist feminists have such contradictory commitments that their avowed feminism is necessarily false, trolling, or simply mistaken in referring to itself as such. In this view, “fascist feminism” is an oxymoron; at most we can talk about fascist femininities, or discourses that “instrumentalise” and “wield” the language of feminism in order to dupe us. In contrast, the imperialist and white-supremacist aspects of canonical liberal legacies like Wollstonecraft’s or Anthony’s can be admitted to and apologised for *without* calling into question their status within feminism or, for that matter, feminism’s integrity. The liberal and literary worlds can apparently talk all day about the sins and missteps of the suffrage foremothers, never doubting for a moment that the feminism in question *can* be separated from the, say, racism, without losing its core shape. Feminism, after all, is understood to be a word that inherently means liberatory politics.

I understand that it can be profoundly upsetting to sit with the proposition that some feminisms have been deadly to indigenous lifeways, dangerous to sex workers, and even, weird as it may sound, misogynistic and patriarchal. It can be tough to get one’s head around Western feminism’s role in the counterrevolutionary logic of cisness, a modern

notion that has harmed all women by bifurcating and hierarchising us in relation to maternal potential, very narrowly defined. The temptation is strong to immediately say, “OK, but what about anti-feminists’ much, much bigger role?” Yet none of this justifies institutionalised avoidance of oppressive feminisms. If they are such a minor thread in human history, what’s wrong with getting to the bottom of them?

The past decade saw a welcome attempt to reckon with “white feminism.” Although interventions like Sojourner Truth’s apocryphal “ain’t I a woman?” speech and Hazel Carby’s “white woman listen!” essay have roiled organised Western womanhood since at least 1851, the putative whiteness of some feminisms has received a greater level of scrutiny. Picking up pace in 2013 before seemingly peaking in 2021 – and spurred by books from Europe, Australia and North America by Reni Eddo-Lodge, Alison Phipps, Ruby Hamad, Mikki Kendall, Jessie Daniels, Rafia Zakaria, and Kyla Schuller among others – this development catalysed a much needed, heartening, and generative reflection. From the hashtag #solidarityisforwhitewomen to the critique of some feminists’ reception of the “Karen” meme as a “slur,” the global North finally witnessed prolonged debate on the subject of “nice white ladies.” This afforded many of us new insights into the racializing effects – and exclusions, witting or not – of contemporary and historic activism, while offering intersectional tools and heuristics designed to broaden the movement.

Inevitably, some of the media reception of these race-critical ideas betrayed a desire to sidestep a deeper reckoning with the anti-liberatory freight of certain kinds of pro-woman politics: the *Observer* thought the bigger injury was making “well-meaning but imperfect people feel terrible about themselves” while the *New York Times* focused on the theory that internal criticisms of the Women’s March were being fuelled by Russia. (Elsewhere, in Canada, the very term “white feminism” is scorned outright as a “tool to dismiss second wave feminists.”) Confronting complicities is hard; it is easier to condemn regrettable feminist moments and then issue a blanket premature recuperation: *mistakes were made and that was bad, but feminism is still good, which means that feminists are never the “real” enemy*. By avoiding a deeper reckoning, mainstream feminism has reflexively denied the possibility of feminist harms.

If there is hope today for the renewal of an internationalist feminism against cisness, it might be found in Western feminism being exposed to – and perhaps breaking open in confronting its limits in the face of – anti-Palestinian femonationalism. Zionist feminism’s global campaign used since-debunked Israeli government claims of sexual violence perpetrated by Hamas to justify the acceleration of genocide in Palestine post-October 7, 2023. Although Anglo-American media will no doubt continue burnishing the Israel Occupation Force’s image via machine gun-wielding Israeli “Zionesses” – “lionesses of the desert” who so vividly embody the seduction of gendered settler-

colonial power *qua* rape revenge in the anti-“white slavery” mode – their credibility is hurt, perhaps irretrievably so.

Concomitantly, anti-Zionist feminist organising is growing, even in the heartlands of Empire. It is nourished on Turtle Island¹ by groups like the Palestinian Feminist Collective and the Decolonial Feminist Collective, whose antipatriarchy organising begins with – but does not stop at – opposing the occupying state. Feminist activists all over the world have been radicalised, if not directly by Palestinian feminists’ analysis of gendered settler-colonialism, then by the unholy spectacle of the reproductive genocide itself. This includes trans activists who have been at the forefront of Gaza solidarity protests, not least because, as the U.S.-based Transgender Law Center argues, “trans liberation is inherently anti-colonial and inseparable from the struggle for Palestinian freedom.”

An optimistic reading of available signs points to the possibility that grassroots anti-colonial feminism is on the ascendant. And the signs are many: The multinational “Feminist Call to Strike for Gaza” on International Working Women’s Day; Ni Una Menos, South America’s anti-femicide movement; the Kurdish “invading socialist society” known as Jineolojî, under the banner of *jin jîyan azadî* (woman, life, freedom), in autonomous north and east Syria; and the small “Transfeminist International” platform from Greece, to name a few. The collective song of revolutionary feminism can be heard in DIY estrogen

undergrounds, abortion networks, transformative justice teams, prison-abolitionist accountability collectives, and in family-abolitionist and disability-liberationist communes attempting to communise care while dreaming of dismantling – for all – the tyrannies of wage, state, and market.

We didn’t choose the relationship of enmity, but it is only through fighting it out that we will make it obsolete.

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1. The Native American term for North America.



FEMINISM AND CHANGE: ACCOUNTABILITY AND STRUGGLE

Dilar Dirik

The desire for change is a reason for why so many people invest time and energy in organising. Some even risk their lives for this promise. And yet, despite countless collective efforts, things seem to get worse in the world. And the cost of change is high. What happens to those that dare to meaningfully challenge the status quo of power is in plain sight for all to see and be intimidated by: full-scale genocidal warfare and irreversible annihilation. That now, historically marginalised identities can be equal participants and decision-makers in destruction and mass murder is a result of change, too. We witness a feminisation, queerisation, and people-of-colour-isation of global power in government, military, and the corporate world, and this shift affects the means of change-making, including the nature of social movements around the world.

Accountability, care, and critical reflection have long been basic aspects of feminist theory and practice. Yet, given new forms of political organising and communicating, shaped by mass media, reliant on external funding, and influenced by consumerist culture, all unfolding in an international context

of neo-colonial and imperialist power, the relationship between change-making and the notion of struggle is not straightforward.

Despite the existence of many rich and diverse traditions within feminist and women's struggles, what is often referred to as liberal "choice" feminism often enjoys a privileged mainstream position. This is not least because it does not present a fundamental contradiction for the dominant system based on class, racial, and gender oppression in a world ordered around capitalist, colonial, and imperialist relations. Partly, this is due to the simultaneous fetishisation and destruction of the individual against society under capitalism. When individuals are atomised, the meaning of radicality shrinks – not even the most seemingly subversive choices pose a threat to power. Indeed, capitalist consumer culture relies on politics and ideologies whose main compass is "No one can judge me, it's my choice." Reducing the idea of feminism to a matter of personal liberty is common, especially in societies in which individuals and their way of life are not as permanently or intimately controlled by family, religion, official state ideology, and other cultural/social factors (relatively speaking, of course). Individual choice-centred feminism can be taken for granted, mainly where certain levels of economic development, legal/state protection, and a culture of relative anonymity and liberalism allow for individual self-expression and social security. Unsurprisingly, this mentality is incentivised and culturally exported from the imperial core to feminist struggles in the rest of the world. Despite the frequent imposition of this perspective as the main common

ground of feminism, individual choice politics cannot be assumed as the main unifying priority for everyone, given extremely divergent conditions around the world and across cultures. To be clear: individual bodily autonomy and liberty are central to struggles against oppression, a fight that is also grounded in personal lives and conditions. The problem arises when a type of laissez-faire feminism, in which individuals are accountable only to themselves and not responsible for the wider consequences of their actions and the cultures they co-curate (today, in an unprecedented manner, easily in a mass way), becomes a superior position and weaponised against collective anti-systemic critique and action.

HOW DOES THIS RELATE TO STRUGGLE?

For decades, people active in political struggles have opposed the pacification or co-optation of social movements through NGO-isation in the service of state and neo-liberal agendas. The era of mass communication has accelerated the process of grassroots politics' orientation towards the globalised market. The aesthetics and contents of social movements are becoming homogenous and uniform as they operate within the limiting parameters of the dominant system. Though certainly not everywhere, being an activist of a certain type is in some places a rewarding undertaking now, with Euro-American funding awaiting those who know how to pitch themselves and their projects in unthreatening and respectable ways. You may "raise awareness" and "lobby

policy-makers,” but you may not “fight the system,” by, say, disrupting the capitalist economy, or exposing state secrets. Nonchalantly using billionaire money for social justice work has been so normalised in activist circles, even among those who fashion themselves as autonomous and radical, that helping each other get access to such funding becomes a form of activism itself. The logic is “We take their money and get work done with it” or a resigned “It’s okay. What can you do? That’s how the game works.” What sounds like a real-life Robin Hood scenario (though the folkloric outlaw and his comrades did not write grant applications but put skin in the game when robbing the rich; the rich did not maintain or increase their wealth through charity but were targets of coerced redistribution) is an industry that makes political struggles unsustainable and complicit in an evolved form of money laundering, in addition to creating ideological assimilation and material dependency. That funding sources often have investments in fossil fuels and other problematic sectors becomes a footnote, irrelevant for one’s oh-so important work. Access to resources creates visibility, which in turn creates the perception of political power and relevance that, in reality, are not there. Is political work produced with such funding, withdrawn at any point, an achievement to be proud of? Romanticising the idea of struggle for the sake of struggle is not necessarily useful and successful organising should be efficient; however, visibility without much labour and sacrifice creates a culture of entitlement and complacency, countering creativity and independence. And unjustifiably cultivating an illusion of

progress in a world full of war and exploitation leads to distorted consciousness.

Capitalist market logics colonise the economic and social relations within feminist political organising work, thereby creating a toxic and indulgent culture of liberal individualism antagonistic to a notion of revolutionary struggle accountable to the most oppressed in society. Predictably, the material conditions of the existing change economy produce prototypes in character and behaviour; increasingly, the profile of a confident, liberalised non-white subject is gaining prominence, one that acts as a symbolic placeholder of change, or, rather, the perception of change both within the imperial core and its peripheries. This flexible role, featured especially in media, entertainment, academia, and NGOs, can now be filled by anyone who understands the assignment. One can be celebrated as a change-maker by repeating liberal talking points and sounding vaguely decolonial, anti-racist, even revolutionary. Just, at all costs, one must avoid terms like capitalism and imperialism, let alone engage in any material resistance, like class struggle, against them. Such an individual is not only uncontroversial but, in some ways, actively desired precisely because they represent nothing but an unattached, baggage-less individual self in addition to a proximity to certain identities that have historically been excluded, oppressed, or marginalised.

While such dynamics have been critiqued on countless occasions across the Third World, they have reached a new stage today. This is particularly visible in the rise of ‘influencers’

in an age of severe state repression around the world. Now no longer limited to content creators that set market trends or sell certain products to influence consumption, the term has come to define a whole style of political opinion-shaping, too. Curating lives to attract attention, validation, and profit while circulating relatively homogenous ideas, influencer-style politics operates through self-branding and performance. The quick, short, and visual presentation of content as determined by social media formats, encourages loud and confrontational ‘hot takes,’ intent on being ever bolder and more radical than what has already been said – in a global context of societal polarisation nonetheless. That the content of any given message does not necessarily reflect the poster’s own lifestyle, social relations, and rootedness in any real-life struggle contributes to the accumulation of low-stakes online discourse. The aura a person assembles around themselves becomes the politic. On top of this, successful feminist content creators often look flawless and luxurious, while the tones, arguments, aesthetics, conducts, and engagement styles often adhere to US American cultural cues and references, further promoting politics as narcissistic spectacle at the expense of humble, conscientious, long-term organising rooted in society. This glamorous profile stands in contrast to the nameless but organised ‘extremist’ subject, the one whose words and actions carry meaning and power beyond the symbolic realm in the marketplace of liberal representation. The presence of an actual ideological intention, the will to fight, and the organisational capacity to do so based on political accountability to actual collective

struggle marks this illiberal political subject for police violence, prison, and assassination.

The gap between feminist words and action, appearance and reality, manifests also in the realm of theory and knowledge production, in and beyond academia and other sites of discourse-making. Today, the skill of writing and speaking in poetic and powerful ways is more highly rewarded than the ability to think critically and independently and to organise and act with victory (ie system change) on the horizon. Going just by words on the internet, we are surrounded by modern-day revolutionaries who seem ready to play a leading role in the struggle for a different world. Aesthetically, too, there is an oversaturation of symbols of resistance and struggle in the bubbles of Instagram and TikTok. Watermelons, keffiyehs, balaclavas, armed women, hammer and sickle, the Circle-A. Signalling proximity to real-life struggle or a real-life philosophy is a matter of a few thumb movements. And between liberal state repression and far-right violence, even that is not taken for granted. Again, the issue is the absence of society-based struggle in favour of easy solutions – indulgent individual politics without skin in the game or transformative capacity. There is a wide gulf between resistance on one hand and the appearance or consumption of resistance on the other. Yet, the two become increasingly indistinguishable in the era of digital existence. No symbol or slogan is inherently subversive. It is the political and economic context within which any given message is banal or explosive, pacifies or galvanises, generates profit or exposes you to harm. While radical and revolutionary politics need

to be popular, relevant, and accessible, this process now happens in a manner that lowers the bar for what it means to fight for another world. It distorts the stakes. The heavy burden of certain political symbols, entrenched in histories of trauma, blood, loss, and mutilation, loses meaning and becomes as light as a feather. How to distinguish the freedom fighter from the cosplayer today?

If feminism is about responsibility, about a commitment to not only change and improve one's own conditions but to free everyone, to dismantle the colonial and imperialist relations in the world, to end war and exploitation, to become a politically relevant and revolutionary force of transformation, then it needs an honest political culture of accountability to society, especially the oppressed.

Feminist struggles are countless, decentralised, and mostly autonomous; they are not states or corporations required to write public transparency reports. Individual feminists are, of course, free to pick their battles and, often, they are exhausted, trying to do what they can in their personal capacity. Accountability, in the sense I mean here, is not a technical or procedural affair. It is a principle, an attitude, a culture, a relationship to power. There is not one way towards it; the point is about morally aspiring to a sober mentality of responsibility against an absurd, market-driven notion of change.

One practice that deserves a more central space in feminist political cultures is self-criticism. Self-critique is a mechanism to overcome some of the attributes that hold one back in the quest for freedom, including features that we love to attribute

to toxic masculinity under patriarchal capitalism: self-centeredness, egotism, arrogance, pettiness, defensiveness, narcissism, and laziness to name a few. It is about holding oneself to certain moral standards, being reflexive and self-renewing, about not resting on one's laurels. Material and ideological independence from the capitalist and state system, a political perspective that views all struggles for liberation as connected, and an anti-systemic but society-serving approach to feminist organising – one rooted inside collective struggle beyond individualist lifestyles – also need deep and genuine commitment to internationalism to decentre one's own immediate needs, instead serving the 'wretched of the earth'.

Such anti-system feminist work that theoretically and practically braids issues like war, state and patriarchal violence, fascism, racism, migrant struggles, class warfare, climate justice and other issues to each other, is already everywhere around us if we dare to look. It is driven by voluntary, unpaid labour, time, and sacrifice. Doing justice to the freedom promised by feminism will not be an easy task. Feminism is labour, it is struggle. And it is worth it, even without reward.

Dilar Dirik is an organiser, writer, and independent researcher. She is the author of *The Kurdish Women's Movement: History, Theory, Practice* (Pluto Press, 2022).

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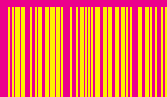
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